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ABSTRACT

These proceedings addressed the question of the future of the classified honors degree in the United Kingdom with emphasis on improvements and alternatives. The meeting addressed four main issues: (1) the current presentation of final results in terms of only four categories (first, upper and lower second, and third class honors); (2) concerns about the reliability and validity of the decision-making procedures that allocate individual students to categories within the classification system; (3) the question of norm-referenced or criterion-referenced assessment; and (4) possible conflicts of interest between students, who desire detailed documentation of individual achievement, and employers who demand simple labels to facilitate processing. Keynote speakers represented academia, government, and employers and included Geoffrey Alderman, Tim Boswell, Margaret Murray, and Richard Winter. A summary of conclusions of discussion groups is also presented as is a satirical response by Laurie Taylor. Another section contains the written comments from conference participants. Background papers included in the document included: "Distinctions of Class" (a London Times editorial); "An End to the Class System?" (Geoffrey Alderman); "University of London Academic Council Working Group on the Classification of First Degrees: Final Report"; "Education or Grading: Arguments for a Non-Subdivided Honors Degree" (Richard Winter); and "Graduate Employment and Degree Classification" (Jason Tarsh). Contains a listing of conference attendees. (NVA)

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The Future of The Classified Honours Degree



EMPLOYMENT
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**THE FUTURE OF THE
CLASSIFIED HONOURS DEGREE**

**PROCEEDINGS
OF THE NATIONAL CONFERENCE
JUNE 29th, 1993
at
Senate House
University of London**

Conference Organisers:

**Professor Geoffrey Alderman,
University of London,
Professor Richard Winter
Anglia Polytechnic University**

Editor of Conference Proceedings:

Richard Winter

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INTRODUCTION

"The Future of the Classified Honours Degree" was the title of a national conference held on June 29th, 1993, at the University of London Senate House. It was sponsored by the Employment Department and by the Society for Research into Higher Education, and was jointly organised by Professor Geoffrey Alderman, Chair of the University of London's Academic Council, and by Richard Winter, Professor Education at Anglia Polytechnic University.

As the title of the conference implies, the underlying theme of the day was a sense that the future of the classified honours degree was open to question, a sense of disquiet concerning some aspects of its present form, and hence a search for improvements, for alternatives. But behind the general agreement that there were problems that needed to be addressed, there were - as the following pages make clear - several discrete lines of argument at work.

- 1) The first was that the presentation of almost all final results in terms of just four categories (first, upper and lower second, third class honours) was insufficiently informative; that universities could reasonably be expected, by both employers and students, to provide *more information* concerning the outcomes of a degree course, eg in the form of a "transcript", in order that proper choices could be made.
- 2) The second argument concerned the reliability and validity of the decision-making procedures which allocate individual students to categories within the classification system. Is there sufficient certainty, agreement, precision, and relevance in these assessment deliberations? If not (and there seemed to be a measure of agreement that there is not) then there is a substantial problem of justice and equity, given the apparently all-embracing significance of the decisions being made.

- 3) Thirdly, there is the question of norm-referenced or criterion-referenced assessment. Beyond the crucial question of adequacy or failure, are there good reasons for wishing to "grade" higher education outcomes, either into overall classes of honours or into a series of percentage marks on transcript documents? In whose interests are such judgements made? Are they well-founded? Are they necessary or desirable? Might we not have a more *useful* qualification in an honours degree which was *not* subdivided, based on a transcript of pass/fail decisions in relation to a series of specified outcomes?
- 4) Although these arguments are distinct, they are, of course, linked, and one further issue seemed to underlie the day's proceedings, that of practicability. Is there perhaps a conflict of interest between students, desiring *detailed* documentation of individual achievement, and employers' personnel staff, demanding *simple* labels in order to processs more conveniently large numbers of application forms? Was this a real issue, or merely a defensive strategy (on whose part?) for warding off the other arguments?

The conference began with four "keynote" presentations. Geoffrey Alderman introduced the main themes of the conference, based on his experience of the present university assessment system. At greater length, Tim Boswell MP, Minister of State for Further and Higher Education, provided a government view, and Margaret Murray, Chair of the Education Policy Group of the Confederation of British Industry, outlined employers' priorities. Richard Winter made a brief statement responding to the comments of the other three speakers. Edited transcripts of these presentations are included in Section One.

The central part of the day was spent in group discussion, and each group presented a summary of its conclusions at a plenary session. These summaries are included in Section Two, together with extracts from written comments subsequently sent by delegates to the conference organisers. Professor Laurie Taylor provided a satirical response to most of the conference issues, informed by his uniquely privileged contacts with the University of Poppleton, as reported weekly on the back page of the *Times Higher Education Supplement*.

An edited transcript of his contribution concludes Section Two.

Section Three includes the background papers sent to the delegates, together with a particularly relevant research article by Jason Tarsh, included by kind permission of the *Employment Gazette*, where it was first published.

Despite the diversity of views and emphases, there was agreement that the classification of honours degrees raises important issues in need of further development. We hope that this collection of the conference proceedings will help colleagues to take their thinking forward on these matters. It is clear that the university sector as a whole needs a coordinated response, and we hope that this document will be a step in this direction.

Richard Winter

Geoffrey Alderman

February 1994

SECTION ONE

CONFERENCE KEYNOTE PRESENTATIONS

PROFESSOR GEOFFREY ALDERMAN
CHAIR OF THE ACADEMIC COUNCIL,
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

I would like to set out in broad brush fashion some of the concerns which I as Chairman of the Academic Council of the University of London have had about the issue of degree classification, and I do this in the context of the learning and assessment processes in higher education. I also have to say, that I do it as an academic who is regarded as something of a conservative in relation to most matters which are currently on the university agenda. The quality of our degree is certainly, in my university, something for which I have special responsibility. I am not someone given to following the latest fashion or fad. The right to be unfashionable, as Professor Lord Russell has recently reminded us, is an essential component of that academic freedom which I hold dear. Others may franchise out their degrees; it is not a road which the University of London is particularly concerned to take, though I defend the right of other universities to take this road if that is what they wish to do. I make these preliminary observations in order to contextualise my own approach to degree classification. The abolition of classification would be a radical step, and especially so for one who is not a radical by nature. Yet, I firmly believe that it is a step which we must take, and take soon , and that we must take this step to preserve and enhance standards. It is a radical step to a conservative end.

The annual round of examinations is now drawing to a close, and in due course, the quality press will publish degree classification lists with their firsts, upper seconds, lower seconds, thirds and so on. This system is regarded, I suppose, as one of the corner stones of standards in British education. But it has not always been thus and it is as well to recall that the method of classification we have now is really of very recent origin. In some subjects, certainly up to the first world war, there was no classification, simply a rank ordering, and in others there were subdivisions within class divisions. I can remember, when I took

history finals at Oxford, in the mid 1960's, that for every candidate for the final honours school of modern history at Oxford *viva voce* examinations were compulsory. They were public, incidentally; any one could walk in, and I remember tramps frequently did so. And I can recall a student being viva'd for fourth class honours (which Oxford still had). This candidate was asked a two part question. 'Which English king in the seventeenth century was executed?' to which she replied, 'Charles the First'; and then: 'By what method was he executed?' to which she replied, 'He was hanged'. So she failed to obtain fourth class honours. To get a fourth was a great achievement: the late Lord Gardiner, former Lord Chancellor, got a fourth in Law at Oxford. To get a fourth, as I remarked in a *Guardian* article recently, seems to have been an enhancement, rather than a restriction, of one's career prospects.

But to be serious, what do these categories mean? Why should we subdivide the second class, but not the third class? Or indeed, why not the first class? I recall once asking a colleague in a French department, somewhere in the Disunited Kingdom, what in his view were the essential attributes of a first class degree in his subject. 'It's easy', he replied: 'The scripts' (he said to me) 'written by a first class candidate reflect a certain "je ne sais quoi"'. I recall also that a number of colleagues, when I confronted them with the question 'why classify?' answered that they did not know, but it had always been thus, and there was no reason to fix something that wasn't broken. But I have to say that I think under a number of pressures the so called traditional system of classification has indeed broken down.

To give one example, under CATS we shall have, I hope, many students whose final degree is the outcome of examination regimes in a number of institutions. In that situation the normal functioning of a degree Board of Examiners cannot take place. Degree classification must then become a purely mechanistic act. Would it not be more honest not to classify, but to present the world with the bare evidence of the candidates' marks for each course taken within the degree programme?

It has been said that classifications are necessary for the purposes of applications to research funding bodies and the research councils. But when I now receive British Academy post graduate funding application forms to be filled in, I am asked by the Academy to indicate which of four categories within the first class a particular candidate in my view should be put. So the British Academy now subdivides first class honours into four subclasses. However, in my experience of my own subject (history) it is generally those with upper seconds who make the best research students. There are a number of reasons for this, some to do with the traditions that we have in my subject of what we are led by custom and practice to expect in a first class script: a script that sparkles in a literary sense, that has a beautiful turn of phrase, that can represent concepts in a crystal clear, concise fashion. But, as I have frequently said in the debate that is now underway on classification, life is not lived under examination conditions. Indeed the fate of the four-answers-in-three-hours examination (I'm speaking very much of course as someone from an older university) must now be held in the balance, particularly as there are much more varied and innovative forms of assessment coming through the system, especially from the newer universities. Why, in my experience, is it those with upper seconds who make the best research students? Because in order to undertake doctoral research a great deal of detailed work has to be done with documentary and other evidence; it requires a great deal of commitment and dedication and an ability to absorb a large number of facts, and it is not necessarily literary style that will get you a doctorate at the end of the day.

Perhaps more importantly, the system of classification in my experience is not understood in the wider world. In the University of London we have a very large medical side, and when I first began to interest myself in this subject I was told that the medical fraternity did not classify their degrees. Now that may be because of a certain vanity that all doctors are first class. However, the approach of the medics is a competence-based approach, and it might well be that in order to be more flexible towards our students we might offer them different assessment regimes and say to them, "There are some courses for which you may

wish simply to demonstrate 'competence' - (a basic competence) - without being graded".

I have to say that when I agreed to chair the University of London inquiry into the classification of non-medical first degrees I found that few employers had the foggiest idea of what actually differentiated a lower second in history or politics from an upper second, save for some vague idea that an upper second must somehow be better than a lower second. A great deal of time is spent by academics on Boards of Examiners deciding individual cases on the 2:1 / 2:2 boundary. The tradition in my subject is that if out of nine or ten papers you get five alpha marks and none of the other marks is particularly devastating you will be classed as a first. But among those alpha marks there are things called "leading alphas" and things called "trailing alphas", and some Boards of Examiners have a rule that you have to have three leading alphas and two trailing alphas. Other Boards have different approaches, particularly in the humanities disciplines, though I understand this is not confined to humanities. At the end of the day I have to say it is very much a matter of chance, or whether the chairman of the Board of Examiners had a good night or bad night, or whether there is time to remark scripts on the actual day of the examination.

There is another factor that leads me to suppose that classification as we have known it is at an end. The secrecy of the Degree Board has now been breached. It has been breached initially by the impact of the data protection legislation. It is also being breached by the culture being built up by the Division of Quality Audit in favour of much more information being made available to students about how their classifications are arrived at. Students will now expect to know, in some detail, the rules by which they are classified, and a university institution which is remiss in this respect can expect, rightly in my view, a bad press as a result. Of course, once you open up the holy of holies, once you have a policy of *glasnost*, the grave inconsistencies within subjects, within disciplines, within universities and between universities must become apparent.

In London we have decided for the moment not to abolish classification but to supplement classification with a detailed transcript. And here let me say that there is an issue which I think needs to be addressed head on. If we decided to abolish classification this would not have any effect on standards. Indeed, I would urge the press present here, and I would urge the Minister (whose presence here I very much welcome) to recognise that this debate does not have anything to do with standards. On the contrary, I believe that as we refine our transcripts standards will improve, since the crude broad sweep of degree class concealing a multitude of sins would have to be replaced by a document that would have to go into some detail concerning performance in individual subjects .

In conclusion, I would urge that the honours degree class system as we know it no longer serves useful purposes. Even those employers who believe it is a short cut to arriving at an estimation of a student's performance will see that by changing to a transcript system we, the universities, can offer them a better service. I believe that the class system of classification of degrees is doomed and I hope that this conference will put several nails in its coffin.

MR TIM BOSWELL MP
UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE OF FURTHER & HIGHER EDUCATION

I am delighted to be here today and to have been invited to address this Conference. The issue you are discussing is one of great and increasing importance: how should the performance of students be assessed and reported? What are the objectives of the degree classification system? Does it continue to meet those objectives? Is there a better way? And if there is, can it be applied consistently throughout Higher Education?

Academic autonomy

While it is tempting to any politician to offer a view on every issue under the sun, the specific subject matter of today's Conference is essentially one for the academic community itself. It is not for government. For it is a long established principle of British higher education that the maintenance of academic standards and decisions about assessment are matters for universities and colleagues to determine. It is they who are accountable for the education they deliver and they, or I should say you, who must decide how that education and assessment is to be delivered. That is why the Government bound itself under section sixty eight of the 1992 Act not to make any link between funding decisions and issues of curriculum or assessment in higher education. It is also why the government left it to institutions collectively, through your Higher Education Quality Council, to carry out quality audit and quality enhancement within the sector.

In standing here before you today, I am inclined to say, as Henry VIII said to each of his wives, 'I shall not keep you long'. But the government, as representative of both the taxpayer and the wider community, does have an interest in what higher education actually delivers and how it demonstrates its accountability. So I should like to speak for just a little while about what those interests are, and how I see them bearing on the debate today.

Government's role

It's one of our overriding duties to seek to ensure that those who qualify from universities and colleges are equipped to meet the needs of our economy. The contribution of a nation's graduates is absolutely essential to its economic performance. That is why my colleagues in the Employment Department have been spearheading 'Enterprise In Higher Education' and why it is so important for universities and colleges to involve local and national business people in the planning of all they do. And if there are any of you who feel this approach is overly materialistic, I have to say that it is only through economic growth that we can afford the resources needed for higher education, or indeed any other public good.

Employers

You have here today among your speakers a representative of the CBI, who will have more insight than I into what the employers want. But we in the Department carried out our own market research last autumn in connection with the higher education charter. That indicated that almost two thirds of employers thought recent graduates had the right sort of skills for employment, and seven in ten thought the situation was either better or unchanged as compared to that of a few years ago. That shows the universities and colleges are on the right track, and I would have been surprised if they were not. But our polling also found six out of ten employers agreed with the statement "I would like to know more about the education and training provided by universities and colleges."

HE Charter

More and better information then is a key theme which permeates our draft charter for Higher Education. It says that students should be informed about the content of the courses, the way they will be taught and assessed, the qualification they will receive and the support they will be given in their studies. And it also makes clear that employers are entitled to know more about the actual achievements of graduates and holders of diplomas.

So I'm fully in support of the maximum possible amount of relevant information being made available about all aspects of our higher education system, and - not least - in the words of paragraph twenty eight of the draft charter: "Exactly what it is that a given graduate has learned and can do."

Transcripts

I asked at the beginning of my speech about the objectives of the degree classification system. Certainly one of these is to indicate how well a student has done. But is it enough simply to send a graduate to a recruitment fair or a job interview with a 2:1 to his or her name? The answer we are hearing from employers is 'not always'. With a sector as diverse as ours and with increased complexity in the construction of degrees (modular approaches and many different types of combined studies) employers may want to know a good deal more than they do at present about what a student has done at each stage of his or her course. I know that a number of institutions have been piloting transcripts or profiles which give an employer a more rounded and complete picture of a student's educational experience. I also know that some countries have this facility for their graduates. I think this is a most positive development building on the National Record of Achievement initiative for young people, and I am watching its progress with interest.

Core Skills

But the messages from employers are not just about information; they are also about course content and teaching style. There is plenty of evidence (not least that carried out recently by the Centre for Higher Education Studies in the London University Institute of Education) that employers increasingly want to be assured that university leavers have well developed communication and problem solving skills and the capacity to work as part of a team. Just last week I read that a survey showed that employers were increasingly looking for evidence from applicants that they could do the job and were not just competent at examinations. It will not take long for students to reflect this in their own

aspirations and expectations from their higher education. Universities and colleges must be geared up and sufficiently flexible to respond to that. And I know that many of you are.

And the skill that perhaps employers want most of all from their employees is to go on learning and developing in employment. The playwright Alan Bennett once said, 'My degree was a kind of inoculation: I got just enough education to make me immune from it for the rest of my life.' Well, ladies and gentlemen, the country as a whole can no longer afford (if it ever could) having the skills and training of its university leavers frozen on graduation day. "Personal Transferable Skills", as they are called, are clearly what are needed in a rapidly changing world employment market. It is also important that British graduates, whose higher education experience is generally more compressed and intensive than that of their European counterparts, should be able to display that they have the full range of skills commensurate with their graduate or diplomate status. I hope that the work that is going on "transcripts" extends also to considering how employers can be assured that students have adequate skills in the key areas I have outlined in addition to their subject knowledge.

Degree Classifications

But what then of the specific issue of degree classification? Well, as I said at the outset, this is not an issue in which it is proper or indeed particularly helpful for the government to be involved. But I will just say this. In Britain we have a higher education system which is highly valued in our own country and throughout the world. It has accommodated a huge increase in student numbers, with a concomitant increase in total funding at the same time as the unit of public resource has been reduced. Most impressive of all, this has been happening without any apparent diminution in the standard of teaching and learning. That is a superb achievement, and one which would have been quite impossible without the planning, organisation, and sheer hard work of academic, administrative, and technical staff in our universities and colleges. I wish to place on record my appreciation for that.

But what do we mean by "No diminution of the standard of teaching and learning"? How do we know? Well, teaching standards can be assessed and reported on, both internally by the review of courses and the appraisal of individual teachers, and externally by Her Majesty's Inspectorate and now the funding councils. Annual HMI reports in the late eighties and early nineties showed that more than ninety percent of the teaching in the former polytechnics and colleges was of satisfactory standard or above. That says a great deal about the standard of teaching.

But what about achievement? Well here it is more difficult. How do we assess whether student performance has been rising? How do employers, faced with ever growing numbers of graduates applying for jobs, begin to form judgements about the quality of output from the higher education sector? There is no doubt that one of the measures has been the number of students who achieve a given class of degree. In a sector as diverse in its provision, mission, student body and educational philosophy as ours, it is the one available measure which has the potential for being applied more or less consistently across time and across the sector. And its existence has surely played its part in retaining and enhancing the confidence of employers and the public in our HE system. For, given the broad comparability of standards across the sector, that is a *reasonable* (I underline "reasonable": not a perfect but a reasonable) guide to student performance. And it means that the pattern over the past decade of slowly rising proportions of first class degrees and upper seconds is a reflection of a sector improving in its performance.

I am not saying that the system cannot be improved or changed. I am very aware that assessment techniques differ around the country, between subjects, even within this university, and of course they have evolved over time. I am aware too that the external examiner system - one of the great forces for maintaining comparability standards - is not without its critics, and that it is the subject of continuing work by the Higher Education Quality Council. But I am also aware that some employers are not happy about ditching

degree classifications before an equally rigorous and tested form of reporting system is worked up. There is a risk, which I suggest we should be careful to avoid, that if the system is shaken too much, employers will revert to distinguishing between graduates or diplomates with reference to the entry standards required of them to enter their university or college. This would be a retrograde step and would severely disadvantage in particular those mature and part-time students who enter with non traditional qualifications. And it would harm also the increasing numbers of entrants, who will, over the next few years, be entering by the NVQ and GNVQ routes.

Conclusion

I suggest that work on transcripts, profiles, core skills and other records of achievement should be taken forward with enthusiasm. But it need not follow, as a corollary to this, that degree classification should be thrown overboard. Conceptually the two approaches can co-exist, particularly if employers find this useful. You must be careful, if you will bear with the analogy, not to throw the baby out with the bath water. Ladies and gentlemen, I said at the outset of my talk that I would not offer opinions. I fear that the politician in me has taken over again and that I have suggested one or two thoughts. But it's for you to discuss these important issues among yourselves. In the time remaining to me, I would like to listen to what you to say. My officials will be staying to report back on your further deliberations.

The minister's speech was followed by a brief time for questions and comments from conference participants. Not all of these were fully picked up by the tape-recorder, so the following is only a selection of the contributions made.

Participant A

I share the Minister's view that it may be too early to get rid of the classified degree, because the instruments set up to replace it are not yet in place, and it seems to me one of the big problems that we are going to face is a lack of consistency in the nature of what is going to replace it. What we are going to need is something that is going to be readily understandable by employers. In one sense we all act as employers, and we know what it is like to fill out application forms. One really does need something which is quick and easy to use, indeed a rather coarse and crude measure, when one is dealing for example with a large number of applications. That is one reason why perhaps we should keep the classified degree.

Participant B

On the baby and the bath water issue, I was at a conference yesterday when two distinguished American academics dealt with questions from students about which university British students should select to pursue their exchanges in America, and the answer they were given was, "Look at the research journals if you want to get an idea of which university to go to for the best experience." This was very alarming. I think we need to know much more about the American system and we need to be careful that in eliminating degree classification we don't leave as the only marker for employers, the publication of research papers.

Participant C

To what extent can higher education, now brought together under the HEFC, design a criterion-referenced system to which the classified honours degree can properly apply, by getting a balance between those items that are indicators at a general level and those that are subject specific? I think work can be done in this area so that instead of having the norm-referenced system applying as a hidden agenda and criterion-referenced statements which seem to be there at the surface, there can be a genuine understanding of different

types of indicators, to which all higher education departments and subjects within them can subscribe.

The Minister made the following concluding remarks.

May I try and draw one or two points out of this discussion? The first one, and I assure you it is not meant to be pointed even if it is a point, is that there is a clear feeling here, that may be held with a greater or lesser intensity, that there is some inconsistency of practice. Now as I explained, and was at some pains to explain, I don't control the higher education quality system. I think you would not thank me if I marched in to intervene in it. But I think this does reflect something which academics may need to take further, and indeed that is one of the functions of this conference.

The second point I think I should perhaps draw out is that clearly it does very much depend on the attitude of employers and what employers find useful. Perhaps we do need, and this is subject to further research, to know a little bit more about what employers do in making up their mind. I have a suspicion that, in the present slightly untidy situation exposed between subjects and between institutions, employers tend to know people and tend to ring them up and say, "Have you a good chemist?" and to look rather more hesitantly at other departments they may not know, however good the classification of the degree or the profile or whatever else is offered. We do need to know a bit more about that. At the same time I do think, and it was implicit in my remarks, that there is a continuing interest in something which is reasonably straight forward and coherent for the busy employer to be able to pick up on. And I think it is the essential tension between that

simple measurement and the need to have as much information as possible which is perhaps behind the nature of your debate today.

Another area that is interesting, I think, is: what are you measuring?. Now somebody did mention the point about whether degree results were acceptable as performance indicators. Well, as you know, the Higher Education Funding Council is looking in terms of teaching quality at other measures of assessment. And what I would just say to you (and you might like to just think about this) is that we are faced with (I think) an academic variant on Goodheart's law, which those of you familiar with monetary economics will know is broadly that every time you target a particular monetary indicator it is of diminishing efficiency in meeting the purpose we want. I think the danger with the whole business of quality is that you will look for something as a proxy for something else, and the more you use it in certain ways the less it will be actually useful. And this is why I think you have to have a range of criteria, and that is what employers will wish to do in making rational decisions for people. And that exposes the fact that the debate continues to be an open one. There is no final solution, certainly not one I'm going to impose.

I would just want to say perhaps three things in conclusion. One is: yes, we do take research seriously. We don't necessarily sign up to it on day one, because this is an important area, and if nothing else if you are looking at degree classification you do see a system that has been in place for many years and in which most people at least know to a certain extent where they are. Secondly, that whatever is done, I'm sure it is in the interests of the academic world, just as much as that of the employers or the government, that this should be seen to underwrite quality and shouldn't be seen as an alternative to quality. And the final point is that what we are trying to do (in for example our charters for further and higher education) is to encourage the institutions to provide as much relevant information as is practicable. Perhaps this could be encapsulated, at least for today's purposes, as Boswell's law about quality, which is: the more information you have, the easier it is to form a judgement as to what is on offer.

I do think that it is important that you should be having this debate, and I think we should all be driving towards as much information for everyone as is practicable to achieve and useful for those who need to use it.

MARGARET MURRAY
CHAIR, EDUCATION POLICY GROUP
CONFEDERATION OF BRITISH INDUSTRY

I suspect, looking round the audience and the delegate list, that most of us here have degrees. Can you cast your mind back to when you were a young undergraduate and imagine if you had said to your tutor, what precisely do I have to do to get a 2:1, or what exactly do I have to do to get a first? Tell me: did anyone ask that? Well let me turn it round further. Those of you who are in higher education as teachers, please raise your hand if you have a crisp, cogent answer for one of your undergraduates if they ask you that? One gentleman! That says a lot! It is our inability to answer that question (which frankly the individual is entitled to have answered) that is at the heart of my presentation this morning. Much of what I will say complements what the Minister has already said. It was marvellous to hear a Minister from the Department for Education saying what he did about core skills and records of achievement. Two years ago that would not have happened, I would suggest.

There are three parts to this short presentation. In the first I will stand right back and explain the rationale for CBI policy, put it in the broad context without which it would not make sense. In the second part I will dwell fairly briefly on the essentials of CBI education policy. And in the third part I will go on to tackle the question on your agenda today.

The scale of the challenge, the economic challenge, facing our members is difficult to appreciate unless you are actually there, in the factory, in the company, with them. And I am not talking about the recession. I am speaking in the long term about the challenge which is driven, largely by the sheer pace of technological advance, which means that the shelf life of a product can be as short as three months. It is a world where customers take

quality for granted. It's a world where the economy is increasingly global, and where what gives each of our businesses the edge will be the ability to innovate, to come up with a new way of doing it better. It's this scene that Robert Reich, one of President Clinton's advisers on economic affairs, has examined in some detail in his book *Twenty First Century Capitalism*. The first chunk of that book is really persuasive. In it he explores our concept of national economies against this global momentum I've described, and when one remembers "Black Wednesday" it is quite clear that the power of national forces over the international economy has waned considerably and will soon be non-existent. By the twenty-first century, Reich argues, national economies will not exist, no more than national technologies. What will define the nation? Its citizens, skills and insights: those are the primary assets we have.

Reich's argument is substantiated by the trends we have noticed in the way in which employers recruit and the ways in which they use their employees. Long gone are days of factory fodder: I would even say at this point that almost gone is the concept of the graduate job in many businesses, but I will come back to that. Employers are looking for qualities and skills. Given the importance of innovation, the individuals they recruit are those who are adaptable, who embrace change and thrive on it, and frankly expect a lifetime of continuous change; people who are responsible, who recognise willingly that whatever he or she does impacts on the company as a whole; and above all who are creative, who will constantly question: "Why are we doing it this way?" And here is one definition of a graduate: a graduate is someone who comes into our business and solves a problem we didn't know we had. This is a broad description of the qualities employers are looking for.

I know that employment forecasts are riddled with caveats and so forth, but none the less, employment forecasts substantiate the trends. More and more job growth will lie in managerial, professional and technical areas, while manual jobs, unskilled jobs are

disappearing - they certainly will not exist by the end of this decade. There is of course a gap between where we need to be, where we ought to be, and where we in fact are. I use the word "gap" deliberately, not "shortage". Bear in mind that of the year 2000 work force 80% are now already in employment, and they lack the skills that are necessary. The significance of that gap is sharpened by employers' awareness of international competition. It is not primarily the competition from Europe that preoccupies our members; it is from the Pacific rim countries, Japan, Taiwan, South Korea and so forth. It is there that they see the long term competition as being most acute. So that is the picture, a challenging one and above all one where our *people* are the key to our future competitiveness.

I'm moving now into the second part of my speech: CBI policy. It's against that challenge that I have already mentioned that we have called for a "Skills Revolution". We first called for it four years ago. And the word "Revolution" was consciously used. It was felt that nothing short of a radical change would enable us to take the quantum leap in skills that was required if we were to remain competitive. But it's on the following principles that all our education policy rests.

The first is that whatever system is in place (and by "system" I would include the qualifications and the funding) it should promote lifetime learning. You should ensure that the individual will go on, is able to go on, continuously to learn. It's a hard nosed principle because continuous improvement equals continuous learning. The second is at the crux of today's event: The individual focus. Given that our competitiveness rests on our people, every effort should be made to enable each individual to raise his or her aspirations to achieve, to go on learning. Therefore the system should ensure that the individual comes first, whereas certainly our members have argued consistently that for the most part our systems currently put the provider first. Now we recognise that putting the individual first is easier said than done. From a business point of view, to put the customer first is not always easy.

Let me be a bit more specific now on policy. In March the CBI brought out a document, which I recommend to you; called *Routes to Success*. Although it is on sixteen to nineteen learning, the strategy and the principles in this document apply right through to retirement. The key recommendation in that report is the need for an overall framework which would enable individuals to manage their own learning and their own careers, where the individual is in control. We recommend four elements in that framework which are inextricably linked and interdependent.

1) Core skills

I'm sure I don't need to say very much on that to this audience, other than to stress that when it comes to job recruitment and selection, employers look for the core skills first. And it is the core skill ability that will be the decisive factor, the ability to work on teams, to know strengths and weaknesses, to listen. All the key things that would enable an individual to be creative, innovative, to cope, to flourish in the company of today and the future. However, there is one catch in "core skills" that I would like to highlight to you: you will not have them unless you know you have got them. They are not done to you like going to the dentist; you do them for yourself. And the more aware you are of your core skills the more you will grow in them. That self awareness is crucial for getting you the job interview (never mind *through* the job interview) and is crucial to enable you to go on to a lifetime of learning.

2) Qualifications,

In *Routes to Success* some key aspects of qualification are outlined. The first of these is that the standards are explicit. The individual needs to be able to say what a "first class" degree means. They need to be in control of what they need to do to achieve it. Secondly: profiles. individuals need a *record*, so that they are increasingly aware of what they have achieved and, more importantly, of where they are going. I wonder how many people in this audience have an action plan - an individual action plan - with your own individual targets and goals.

3) Careers

I'll be brief here, since I'm running out of time. Education and guidance: individuals need impartial top quality advice concerning available opportunities.

4) Educational Credits

Finally credits, *financial* credits: the financial power to buy your course. This, we would say, is the engine which should drive the framework. It's not at the forefront of your agenda today so I will leave it there.

To move now to the third part, ladies and gentlemen, the question of the honours degree. Let me start with a rather trite statement but one which I think could be forgotten in today's debate. Employers recruit people not qualifications. I'm often asked, "Do employers prefer economics degrees to history degrees?" or variations on that kind of question. But it is the people, the individuals that employers are looking for, those who have the self awareness that I have described, the core skills, and, yes, the proven academic talent too. But it is *the person* who is on their agenda, not the qualification. To probe now a bit further into the classified honours degree and recruitment: I would stress to you the sheer diversity of employers. There are blue chip companies who are very au fait with the classified honours system, and who have been doing the "milk round", very thoroughly some of them, since the late fifties. They know the inside track. There are some companies for whom it is essential, if they are to create wealth, that they get the absolute cream. One member said to me, "I need boffins; I need boffins that will get along with others, but I do need boffins." There are also many small and medium sized companies, some of whom also want boffins. But the point here is that more and more small businesses are recruiting graduates. They did so in the mid eighties, they dipped in and out of the graduate market in a way they had never done before. And we would predict that when the economy picks up, that is where the growth is going to be, in graduate recruitment. And as a side effect of that our large companies, as I'm sure you are very

well aware, are becoming increasingly fluid, flatter and less hierarchical. And that leads me on to my point about graduate jobs. We have been sounding out our members on that, and some frankly say they want an elite, and they are going to keep needing that for the foreseeable future. For others it is wide open: there are those small businesses (those who see real growth potential) who simply say, "I'm recruiting a graduate, long term management potential." To sum up, our members would all agree on three things. First, core skills, as I have mentioned already. Second, they want brains, they want evidence that a person can analyse, ie the qualities one would traditionally associate with a graduate. Linked with that, thirdly, they want to be sure of quality, absolutely sure about it, and they do not want to have to go through a complicated process to get that assurance.

I come now to my message. It's a rhetorical question: what are the standards? Because at present they are not known, are they? I would argue that the way forward is this: first and foremost, define the standards. Define it for the benefit of each undergraduate, so they know what the objective is and what the criteria for achievement are; so that he or she can manage their learning, so that they are in control, and so that when they leave, they go out sprinting, ready to continue learning, instead of passive victims, labelled according to norms which exist in the heads of some small group of people. Define the standards from the point of view of employers, so that they know what they are getting, in such a way that it is not just a label but an objective definition, one that means something. Please integrate core skills into those standards so that they are the criteria for success. And I would also build on what is happening in provision for the pre-nineteen age group, where, even though the system is uneven, the general strategy is going in the right direction. In other words, the report on the individual as he or she comes in to HE is derived from the Record of Achievement based on a process involving continuous dialogue; so that students know what they are achieving and what to do next: it's not just "Gamma" or "Alpha".

I want to end on employers, because they are on a steep learning curve in the world of change I have described. Many are having to clarify the skills they currently need and will need in the long term. That is affecting their recruitment, and we urge our members to collaborate in that process with educational institutions, as many already do. I mentioned educational / financial credits earlier on as the engine driving careership, but I will end by mentioning also the Investor in People standard. I would suggest to you that that initiative (the Investor in People standard) on the part of employers may be able to help to create some of the pressures which I think many of you want to see in order to bring about change.

RICHARD WINTER
PROFESSOR OF EDUCATION
ANGLIA POLYTECHNIC UNIVERSITY

I will be extremely brief, because after the three presentations we have already had there is little that I feel needs to be said at this stage.

First of all we seem to be agreed that there is enormous *diversity* in the degree experience, and therefore we need a lot more information, so that people know what is happening.

What we are not quite so sure about I think is whether the diversity of experience falls into a hierarchical pattern or is *merely* diversity. Mrs Murray said that her employers wanted "boffins". Now a boffin is a term implying simply a certain kind of mind and a certain type of personality, but then she immediately went on to say, "They want the cream."

Now, unless you happen to be suffering from a high cholesterol level there is a general sense that cream is *better*, than skimmed milk for example, so I suspect that when Mrs Murray said that some employers wanted "boffins," she implied that they wanted "the best". Now what I am suggesting is that we need to question whether the manifold diversity of learning outcomes which take place in our universities have the form of a hierarchy, whether some are necessarily better than others, rather than merely being *different*?

The next stage of that argument is: if there are some that are better than others, do these differences, does this hierarchy, show a normal curve of distribution? Are there very few of the very best? Are there quite a lot of the very good? Are there very few of the unsatisfactory? Is that the most useful way of thinking about it? Is the normal curve of distribution the pattern into which this diversity falls? Because that is the foundation of the classified honours degree. Now some people have said, "Let's not throw out the baby

with the bath water" and have gone on to suggest that maybe we could have firsts, 2:1's, 2:2's, and thirds, but have clear criterion-referencing, so that we know exactly what a first is, exactly what a 2:1 is, and so on. But criterion-referencing means that, in principle, with very good teaching, for example, 75%, 85%, or even 100% of your cohort of students could regularly obtain first class degrees. If you accept that, fine: the problem is indeed solved. If you do not accept that (and I think many would find such a system strange or even paradoxical) then we still have a problem about what to do with this baby (or the bathwater).

Finally, I just want to say that I agree that what we are envisaging is a difficult process. But it also seems to me that there is a very interesting, important, and worthwhile intellectual challenge here. In the eighteenth century problems of standards and the problems of the relevance of university education were addressed at that time by having recourse to a hierarchical classification. I think that was OK then, but basically I think it was too easy and too crude. Naively, perhaps, I believe in progress: I think we can do better. I believe that after two hundred and fifty years of further thinking about the philosophy of knowledge and theories of learning we are more sophisticated about the nature of knowledge, about the nature of learning processes and about the nature of qualitative judgements. I think that we as educationalists *ought* to be able to provide a sophisticated account of the learning outcomes of higher education. I think that it is an entirely appropriate project for higher education to develop a sophisticated description of higher education processes.

I also think it is very worthwhile, because it involves placing an important aspect of social decision-making on a more reliable and a more rational basis. And that is to say: it is a particular aspect of the pursuit of reason, truth, and justice. It is therefore a project which it is entirely appropriate for us, as academics, to engage in. Let us not in higher education accept a situation where our own educational practices are part of the irrationality and injustice which it is actually the claim of higher education to address.

SECTION TWO

RESPONSES

**REPORTS TO THE CONFERENCE PLENARY SESSION
FROM THE WORKSHOP GROUPS**

**following discussion of the Keynote Presentations
and the Background Papers - see Section Three**

Comments from Group One

- * Assessment outcomes must be owned by several stakeholders, and any systems *must* reflect that.
- * Pass / fail versus grading: how much time do you really want to spend arguing about whether it is sixty seven percent or sixty five percent? On the other hand, how unsatisfying is it to do really well in an assessment task still just to "pass"? So there is an issue there about what it means to assess, what it means to the people being assessed and to the assessors? Also at which unit level do you assess? Every unit, every half unit, every programme, every course, every year? Also, assessment does not equal grading. You have to allow room for formative assessment, as well as summative assessment. The student must have some positive feedback about the learning that they have undergone. And the way that we record that assessment ought to be reflected in some way.
- * Personal skills and qualities, or personal transferable skills, must be incorporated into the framework of assessment. We didn't come up with the answer as to how, but portfolios, profiles, and records of achievement were mentioned.
- * And finally "empowerment". If we go for a more transparent assessment process, the students, the learners and the teaching staff have to feel comfortable with that. There has to be *joint* empowerment of all the people involved in the process.

Comments from Group Two

- * It is higher education that must justify the status quo. We feel there are only two alternatives. One is that we actually address and define what a degree class actually is, and what it tells us and the world, and we must justify that and the whole supporting structure. But we doubt if we can do that, and if we cannot do that, then (the other alternative) we must change it.
- * Those are the alternatives. But if we change it we must offer a replacement system, and we must consider that carefully. And that actual process of change, what should the pace be: should it be evolutionary or revolutionary? Recent experience in higher education suggests that the pace of change is extremely fast. So we have got to be ready and to be able to help and support our colleagues in actually making that change. So we have to raise the debate and we must be very clear and articulate about what we mean. In fact, rather than evolutionaries or revolutionaries, we should be evangelists.
- * Higher education must lead itself and others; if we don't, perhaps others will, and we may not like the direction they lead us. But we must go forward together, not just higher education on its own, but very much in collaboration with the employers. We are aware of the great lack of research into what students think, and we must find out and address students' needs also.
- * Then there are a number of issues about the effects of being clearer about our objectives, about defining and detailing and being more specific. Perhaps that will lead to a greater diversity of *kinds* of degrees, perhaps even *kinds* of institutions and certainly *kinds* of graduates. We must take that into account in our thinking. And that will also require more flexible methods of learning.
- * This change needs to be managed as opposed to be forced, and the only way we can do

that is to take control of it ourselves. The need for collaboration is very strong and we have a great deal to learn from the employers. We take the point made this morning, that we have to do much more to find out how employers make the choices, and how we make choices, so that we can develop mutually helpful selection criteria.

Comments from Group Three

- * There are two agendas going on in this debate. One is a very simple one about whether we should classify people into a very small number of classifications. The problem is: the smaller the number of categories, the more critical the boundaries become; and therefore the greater the potential unfairness of the boundaries. And for that reason we are quite happy with the idea of profiles or transcripts and so on, in the London University style, which of course some places have been doing for some time. We have no problem with adopting profiles, and, at the same time, a grade point average or something similar, rather than a narrow classification.
- * The other agenda is whether these profiles should be more like the Records of Achievement (which some schools are trying to give up as fast as they can incidentally). If we have records of achievement, should we have assessments of interpersonal skills, public speaking, team membership and so on, and the whole issue of core skills?
- * That then raises the following issue: if they are going to be in the profile, then we are going to assess them. Then: if we are actually teaching core skills, don't we have to think generally about what we teach in our courses? Because assessment surely follows design, otherwise we are merely assessing a sort of "innate ability".
- * So for us this is not only a simple move away from classification but a much more major issue about the design of what we do in higher education, especially if our profiles are really going to include a range of things that many degree courses (at least in traditional universities) don't formally design and teach.

Comments from Group Four

- * Our first point is that within higher education we have to understand what our particular role is, and that appears somewhat split. Are we trying to give our students some sort of recognition for their academic performance during the years they have been with us, or are we focusing upon what the employer needs? Can these two things be reconciled? we didn't seem to think they were being reconciled at the moment.
- * The importance of transferable skills was acknowledged, but we felt that wasn't the whole issue. We then considered that what employers need is quite different and distinctive, as was mentioned by the CBI this morning. Furthermore, not only are the needs of various employers different, but even within a given company there are quite different needs that are going to be expressed. Therefore, how are we going include students' achievements? Any form of classified or non-classified piece of paper is going to have to meet a variety of needs in order to adequately represent how the student has performed.
- * On classification, we looked at whether we should have degrees with or without the subdivisions we have now. On the whole we considered that the way that people assign the classifications is a hidden mystery even within the examination board system itself. However, one person in the group bravely said that he could define the classification categories, and we thought that we ought to put it in front of you. If someone gets a third they have learned something, but we aren't quite sure whether it is accurate or not. If they get a 2:2 they probably have learned something and the information is correct. If they get a 2:1, the information is correct and they have addressed the question as well. And if they get a first, not only have they got the right information and addressed the question, they have also presented it in a manner that we can read and understand.

* Employers already use a number of criteria when they are selecting people. They look not only at what degree somebody has, they look at where they have studied, what subject they have studied, and when. It is a matter of a linking of all of these elements together, as well as looking at what is needed within the employment situation: the team that they are going to join, the particular personal qualities (as well as a wide range of other qualities) that they will need to demonstrate within that particular post.

* We considered that we probably need both transcripts and classification, since they are complementary. But are they necessary? If we just had transcripts, should we include failures, or are we just providing a record of all the good things that someone has done, without mentioning those things that maybe they didn't do so well at? (Or, maybe, things they didn't do so well three or four years ago, but they did well more recently?)

Comments from Group Five

* First of all, the format of transcripts. It was noted that many departments do this at a departmental level anyway, by giving some sort of examinations record. We seemed to be generally in favour of transcripts, even though we agreed that there would be some problems of putting things into practice. In fact, we even felt that the University of London transcript might not have gone far enough, for example, by not really giving a full definition of what is meant by "excellence".

* We then talked about some of the skills which we might wish to include on the transcripts, going beyond the academic. We all thought it would be a good idea in theory for transcripts to include some sort of discussion of transferable skills and personal qualities. But we noticed that there would be tremendous problems in putting this into practice, and we didn't seem to come to an agreement on how this should be done in terms of actual assessment procedures.

- * Concerning classification itself, it is probably worthwhile using some summarising category because if we don't do it then somebody else will, whether it's the British Academy or whoever. However giving 2:1's, firsts and so on is rather crude, and they shouldn't be given out on their own. Again: back to transcripts. We also noted that employers look not just for a degree classification but also for a general profile and a record of achievement.
- * Finally we gave consideration to learning outcomes. For example, module writers might wish to incorporate in their module the sorts of skills and knowledge they wish to impart during the module. We felt this may very well be a useful thing to do. It would certainly make a move away from very generalised statements.

In summary, there were a few things on which we agreed. Firstly, that criteria for assessment should be highly specific. Secondly, that the idea of a record of achievement was good, whether or not there was any grading on it. Thirdly, that staff-student dialogue was vital. We also noted the problem of resources and how this would limit all the marvellous things we were suggesting. Finally, we were agreed that the crude degree classes that we have at the moment should not be given out on their own.

Comments from Group Six

- * We started by trying to determine whether in fact classification was going to be sustainable over the next few years anyway. We looked at the introduction of modularisation in particular, which is something which has swept into universities in a mere two or three years. And we decided that now, with the publication of marks and indeed the publication of the systems that support the classification of students, it will become virtually impossible for meetings of examiners to actually sustain the current arrangement for classification, which rely almost exclusively on secrecy.

* The examiners meeting would essentially be boxed in, and they would not be able to produce classifications which they wanted to because the marks would dictate something else. And they would find that with the arrival of credit accumulation and transfer systems, whereby you get evidence from outside institutions, it would be increasingly difficult to sustain the current system. For example, how do you interpret marks from other institutions? You might have a chance of interpreting your own marks, but marks from outside institutions would be very difficult.

* We went on and decided that it was somewhat irrational to classify first degrees. We don't classify any higher degrees at all, we don't classify the MSc or the PhD. Indeed, the Vice-Chancellor on our group said that if we persisted with classification he would want to classify honorary degrees. We also felt that classification was particularly unjustifiable in an environment of "learning for life". It seems particularly unfair for a student who got his degree in 1963 on a bad day to be saddled with a third for good, when there is no chance of going back and doing better. (Unless of course you fail completely, and then of course you do have the opportunity, possibly, of going back and having another shot at it.)

* We looked at the question of how the issue might affect the professions. Medics don't use classified degrees at all, so that is relatively straight forward. Engineers do, and one accepts that also. However, the award of a first degree is increasingly seen as an irrational basis on which to grant professional recognition. Engineers, we felt, tend to be looking more for a bridge between HE and NVQ level five. And employers generally when they are employing people (and it was emphasised again that it is *people* who are employed, not qualifications) often look at the institutions from which those qualifications came, rather than the qualifications themselves, because the detailed information simply is not available. And that led us on to agree that good transcripts are absolutely vital.

* Finally the effect on students. If you remove the classification system, it could have a de-motivating effect , but equally, classification for life could be de-motivating.

It's important therefore, we felt, that whatever we put in its place, must be sustainable, understandable and in every way acceptable to the students and employers. So a good transcription system, giving both the course content and the structure, is vital.

Comments from Group Seven

*We were unanimous in our agreement on the abolition of classified degrees. But what we would like to note are some cautionary points in that respect. We all felt that in any move of this kind the transcripts which are issued to students should be fully detailed and should reflect the complexity of the student experience. We all agreed that the classification label is an unduly blunt instrument. It does not reflect either the complexity of the student or of the student experience. And so the transcript should itemise every part of a student's programme as far as is possible.

* The production of transcripts is being driven by modularisation and the development of credit accumulation and transfer systems, and this is welcome in so far as it is removing the secrecy and the subjectivity that is involved in arriving at classified honours grades. This move towards a greater openness is bringing certain features with it which we need to be prepared for.

* There may be a tendency for the arithmetical methods of calculating results (which are typical of the North American universities' approach) to be used to reinforce a process of "fine grading" students, and this could very easily revert back to something similar to a classifying system. So there is a need for any kind of report or transcript to be qualitative rather than merely quantitative, and this would be especially important for credit which is given outside of the UK.

* We felt that transcripts should be primarily for the benefit of students. Their main purpose should be to help students gain some analytical understanding of their own

performance. The main objective should not be the convenience of employers. However, we did not see the two purposes as being mutually exclusive. But as part of the qualification the transcript should be there primarily for the benefit of students, as an incremental account of the staged progress that a student had made.

* Lastly, it is important that this should be a completely national move. We know that British society along with its education system is status ridden. If traditionally high status institutions do not move in this direction (regardless of the intrinsic value of the unclassified degree combined with the transcript) the reality is that a differentiated status could very easily arise between those who retain the classified honours degree and those who abandon it. In other words, it is important that there should not be a divide between the old universities and the new universities, so if this innovation is going to have currency across the board it must be adhered to as a process by the whole of higher education.

Comments from Group Eight

* We took up "diversity" as an important issue, arising from our consideration of the purposes of higher education. The first thing to say about diversity is that we should celebrate it, we should see it as a strength. Nevertheless, we did feel that we could differentiate between students. We were not quite sure, perhaps, at times how, or why or when this should be done. But, of course, like everyone else in the room, we know a first class script when we see one.

* Next, given the strength of diversity, how do we ensure consistency? What does consistency mean in this context? We looked at two aspects. The internal consistency, within subjects for example: can we make meaningful comparisons between subjects? Externally, we touched upon the threatened species of the external examiner: some concerns were expressed in that direction.

- * What would be the perception of higher education on the part of employers, professional bodies, and so on, if we moved to an unclassified system? We felt that prejudice would surface because employers and representatives of professional bodies would want some pegs to hang students on. What is a first class student, now that you don't have a classified system? Clearly it might be (and this has been touched upon by one of the earlier speakers) "Where did you do your degree?" That may be the new classification.
- * We also felt that the unclassified system remained judgmental. Clearly it is not a question of, "Is it sixty four per cent or sixty three?" I remember a conversation on the telephone when an external examiner was not present at an Exam Board, and we had a problem as to whether this particular student would be a 2:1 or a 2:2. And this long telephone conversation was relayed to the board, and "Eureka!" the external examiner *could* find that extra half a percent or one percent to move the student up to a higher level! Clearly with a non-classified system it will be less precise (if precise is the right word) but it *is* judgmental.
- * Concerning profiling, transcripts and portfolios. We appreciated the thoroughness that they offered, but equally we felt that we would need to educate people within and outside HE to understand the meaning of these terms. Within our group we had different views as to what each of them meant.

Comments from Group Nine

- * We were all agreed, I think, that the present system is indefensible, indefensible intellectually: it's unreliable and invalid. Its only rationale really is its comfortable familiarity within the academic world - a world with which others are not familiar. We don't think that it can survive modularisation, credit accumulation and transfer, openness in dealing with students, and so on. We thought that Professor Winter's article (*see Section*

Three) had made the case for change, though some of us maybe were not sure that he had made a case for a particular replacement. And if the present system is to be replaced, it must be with a system which is defensible, valid, reliable and internally consistent. We wondered whether there is a role for the HEQC here: we think that there is clearly a need for a lot more research, though we wonder who is going to fund it.

* Colleagues made the point that change is threatening to staff. We are talking about a massive change here, a change of culture. This is the Ark of the Covenant we are talking about here; this is one of the pillars that holds up the temple. And we are talking about hacking away at its base. The effect of doing so would of course be to shift power from the present guardians of the faith to somebody else, and that is never a popular thing to do, in the eyes of those who currently hold power. It would require a great deal of work; for example: defining learning outcomes, setting criteria for judging satisfactory performance, assembling student records, preparing transcripts, and revising regulations. The effect of the prospect of that workload should not be underestimated, and it will need careful management.

* However, the criterion-referenced system (one adopting the learning outcomes approach, NVQ's, and so on) also has problems. It still leaves you with the question about how to approach hierarchy and levels of competence. It still leaves you with questions about defining the level of satisfactory performance. It leaves you with the problems of evaluating evidence, and it leaves you with the problems of ensuring consistency. How do you get consistency and who ensures that you have got it? Nevertheless, we did agree that in respect of all subjects there should be defined, published learning outcomes, and specified criteria for satisfactory performance.

* We then went on to agree however (and this is an important qualification) that most of the group were in favour of the retention of the concept of a hierarchy of skills and knowledge which the assessment system would recognise. Assessment should be against

criteria, not against other students, but we should not cease to recognise the common sense approach which does rate people's performance. Employers want it. Possibly, even (for purposes of motivation) students want it. So there was a majority there.

* But this should be expressed in broad categories; numbers (which take on a magic of their own) should be banned: no adding, no averaging, and no overall judgement of class, which seeks to make a false, apparently final judgement. There should be transcripts which should record this broad level attained in each subject, but (again) no overall purported final assessment of the student.

* Finally, if we are to replace the present system with a new one over a period of time, it should be a national system for ensuring validity, reliability and consistency.

Comments from Group Ten

* We agreed there were two approaches to the current system: either you could say that it was a complete sham and a con, or you could say that it gave broad, if rough, justice. Whichever view you adopted, neither could be demonstrated. Although there is a lot more anecdotal evidence to show that it is indeed a sham and a con.

* At the very least what needs to be done is to make clear and explicit how we reach the decisions we do reach, both at the level of the assessment of an individual paper or essay or whatever, and also at the level of classification. And if the classification system is to be retained for at least a short period, we need to make clear and explicit these things to ourselves, first of all, and then, once we've set our own house in order, to the outside world. What we must try to do in this process, of course, is to eradicate inconsistency but not diversity.

- * Everything that I have said so far could apply equally (and perhaps even more so) to the production of transcripts and profiles. Because if they are based on our current state of self awareness in our assessment practices then they could inspire even less confidence than the classification method.
- * We were agreed on the need to discriminate, to maintain the hierarchy. This is expected by employers; it is expected, we think, by students, although we would have welcomed more student views.
- * How to achieve change? We envisage quite a lot of resistance: it will be the fourth end of civilisation in the last three years, in some people's eyes. We envisage more events like the excellent event today, so that a national debate is engaged. We envisage that the Higher Education Quality Council would be involved. There is also a role for the Quality Council Assessors, for professional bodies and also for discipline-based bodies. There may be a role for those disciplines which do have recognisable (or at the moment recognisable) borders to put their own criteria in place, to seek some sort of agreement at national level. The problem we foresee is the next stage: of calibration across disciplines.
- * What we are advocating I suppose, (to reverse what Geoffrey Alderman said earlier,) is a conservative step towards a radical end. But we do recognise the urgency of the problem, especially in view of the reality of the modular system as it is at the moment.

*Professor Lewis Elton, who chaired the Plenary Session,
concluded with the following points:*

I'm just going to make a couple of comments. The first comment is that quite a lot of people have referred to new ideas, to research that has to be done etc, and I would like to re-emphasise the point that there is an enormous amount of research that is waiting to be used. A number of people have said, "But we don't know how to", but there is a lot of

research that will enable us actually to make petitions and report in an informed manner. It is not necessary to start huge research programmes, although it will be necessary to evaluate the changes. Let's use the bank of research results that exist.

Another point is that nobody has mentioned the words "staff development". I am absolutely convinced that if we are to achieve such a change then staff development will be an essential part of the process. Certainly the Enterprise for Higher Education Programme (which as far as I can make out, has been a remarkably successful change agent) has put more resources into staff development than any other activity. So I think that is a point worth bearing in mind.

Another crucial point is that the old assessment system does not fit the changing teaching and learning system. And, again, what has not yet been brought out is that assessment has a huge effect on the learning that precedes it. Students work towards exams. That does not mean that they work *only* towards exams, but they cannot afford not to. So if we set up an exam system that does not match our objectives in what we want to achieve in teaching and learning, then we will not achieve it because students will be guided more by the exams than by the teaching and learning system.

Finally, I would like to say that these ideas (transcripts, portfolios, detailed information instead of bald academic grades) are not really all that new. They were proposed many years ago by certain *student* publications. Perhaps it is time that we (academic staff from lecturers to Vice-Chancellors) started to catch up with our students!

**PROFESSOR LAURIE TAYLOR:
A PERSPECTIVE FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF POPPLETON**

The University of Poppleton is one of the universities in this country where, very fortunately, the number of first class honours degrees has recently been going up quite markedly. That is particularly lucky, because it just happens to coincide with the demands of the research councils for first class honours degrees as a condition for obtaining postgraduate research grants. I want to say, also, that we take a very deep interest in assessment processes. Indeed, I think we are the only university that has an examination in Examinations. I have here the questions from the BA honours degree in the theory and practice of examinations setting. I'll read you this year's paper, just as a matter of interest, so that you can see how carefully we are considering the sort of questions being discussed in today's conference.

Time allowed: three hours. There are three questions.

- 1) *Critically evaluate the changing role of the oral in the British examination system.*

(Bit of a tricky one there.)

- 2) *Recent advances in examination setting theory suggest that we may soon witness the demise of the familiar instruction, "Answer one question from each section". Do you agree?*
- 3) *Write a short essay on any topic which you have not covered at all on the course, but which has never the less turned up on the examination paper.*
- 4) *"The harder you look at the words in this quotation from someone called Dawkins the less sense they seem to make." - Dawkins. Discuss.*
- 5) *Critically discuss the relative merit of "Critically discuss" and "Critically evaluate." (You may use log tables)*
- 6) *Write brief notes on any two of the following terms:*
"Aegrotat" "Mitigating circumstances", "Doctor's note".

Now I must say that sitting here during the day I have felt in a way that the discussion has been a little bit one-sided, that there is a bit of an overstress perhaps on numerical marks. I do not think there has been enough emphasis on the peculiarly *personal* ways in which staff and students interact, on the individual feedback that is given. We pride ourselves at Poppleton very much on our personal feedback. I'll just give you an example of the way in which we provide this sort of feedback at Poppleton. We think students benefit from it a great deal. This is a transcript from a recent meeting between a supervisor and a student.

Gribbens, there you are at last. The reason I wanted to see you is quite straight forward: we have got our examiners meeting coming up in a few weeks time, and it is just possible that if you turn out to be borderline we made need to have a jolly old glance at the tutorial record. Understand?

Yes sir.

Now then, Gribbens, let us have a look at the reports for year one. Not a bad start. You have got a "Satisfactory" here for theory, and over the page a "Satisfactory" for method, and - let me see - you have got a "Satisfactory" down here for your options. So that is not a bad start at all.

No sir.

But then things really seemed to go off the boil a bit in the second year, as though you decided to take a bit of a breather.

Sir?

Well, I see, for example, that your second year tutor only gives you "Satisfactory" for your methods, and in theory you cannot really come up with anything more than "Satisfactory". And quite honestly there is not much support elsewhere: only "Satisfactory" in your options.

Yes sir.

Well, no point crying over spilt milk, water under the bridge.... On to the third year.

Slightly more cheerful picture here. A nice sort of start in theory: a good clear "Satisfactory". And also, I see, beginning to pull up a bit in method: a promising "Satisfactory" here. No problem in the option course either: that is graded as "Satisfactory". All in all: jolly good!

Thank you sir.

It's an interesting record, Gribbens: a slightly spattery first year, which you didn't really build on with that "satisfactory" second year, but then a bit of a late spurt to bring you up to a "satisfactory" level in your final stages.

Yes sir.

Do you know what I am going to do Gribbens?

No sir.

I'm going to take a chance with you.

Thank you sir.

I'm going to put you down as "Satisfactory". Now don't let me down, will you?

No sir, I'll do my best.

Now this is an indication, I think, of the ways in which these qualitative interactions take place: the supervisor beginning to know the student, gaining a knowledge of the student, which I believe can eventually be incorporated within the examiners' meeting itself. Now I have heard such meetings being decried by one or two people here to day, which is a failure to recognise how all the detailed personal, biographical information which has been built up over the years can be brought to bear upon the final classification result. You see, at a Poppleton Examination Board there is no question of power or mystification. The suggestion that, as it were, academics on these occasions engage in some sort of a

perpetuation of their own egos is nonsense. Here is a transcript, for example, from a recent examiners' meeting, which gives an insight, I think, into the careful way in which (at Poppleton certainly) we go about these matters.

Now, script 0027163. I don't think there is too much problem here.

Looking across the marks it seems a pretty straightforward lower-second, a very consistent set of 2:2 marks. Yes, on the face of it I would say a middling sort of lower, without a great deal of upper support. Any other comments before we move on? Yes, Professor Dewlap.

Well, I can see what you mean, Dr Worthy, about the general lower-second quality of the particular marks, but I wonder if I am alone in detecting a slight upperish scent within the overall array?

I'm sorry, Professor Dewlap, did you say, "An upperish scent"?

Well, perhaps "scent" is a little strong. Let's say there is a hint of something a shade more lively, bubbling along beneath the rather bland exterior.

Do you mean a sort of upperish liveliness?

I'm not certain I would want to commit myself completely, but a definite intimation of something a little more than a standard lower.

But nevertheless you would admit to the overarching blandness?

Yes indeed, there's no doubt about that. But (how might one put it?) it seems a rather interesting blandness - a blandness, perhaps, which has that slight lack of balance which carries a suggestion of forthcoming maturity.

I'm not certain I want to go all the way with you on that, Professor Dewlap. Indeed, I sense in one or two of the marks a certain thirdish quality, a rather immature, thin, yes even stalky character.

Oh no, surely not. I mean, I can accept three 54 marks are less robust than one might

wish, but there is a definite, sturdy almost yeoman quality to those two 55 marks. And along side those is that nice rounded 57, which contains just a hint of finesse which I believe raises the suspicion of upperishness.

I'm afraid that is going much too far. I mean, look at the range. I mean: 51 to 57. Essentially loose knit!

Not at all. Consider those two 56's. Inaccessible, I grant you; a certain closed-in quality, possibly; but nevertheless, absolutely no lack of body.

Well, Professor Dewlap, I'm afraid we must disagree. Perhaps our external examiner has an opinion which might help resolve the matter?

Thank you, Dr Worthy. Most interesting comment all round. But I really do feel we are all getting far too carried away by mere impressions.

This is candidate 00772163 is it not?

Yes indeed sir.

Well, I think the matter is easily resolved. Certainly, when I received the scripts I rather agreed with Professor Dewlap about their possible upperish quality, but when I came to re-examine them in my hotel room last night I found them to be of a thoroughly lowerish character. Indeed, there can be no doubt that "lower" must be the proper mark. However initially attractive, this candidate clearly does not travel well.

As I said earlier, I found the references by some speakers to secrecy and mystification somewhat unfortunate. Rather, I think that what happens in our examiners' meetings at the University of Poppleton is that we are able to bring the knowledge that we have derived from tutorials and supervisory sessions to bear on the actual classification. We are able to take personal circumstances into account. And how can we possibly disregard these in deciding upon the final classification of the degree? Surely, bald objectives and stark transcripts cannot adequately convey our sense of the quality of an *individual* character,

our sense of the delicate interaction between compassionate, medical, biological circumstances and the actual raw marks themselves. Let me give you another transcript of a recent meeting at which this compassionate evidence was taken into account.

May we have the next case, candidate 308? May we have a name?

Pauline Thompson, sir.

Good. Now this is, as you can see, a pretty marginal case: a nice set of marks, but averaging out at 58 / 59: borderline 2:1. Any compassionate evidence on this one at all? Yes, Dr Jarman. You are the supervisor here I understand.

Yes sir. Well quite honestly I am surprised that Pauline has done as well as she has. As some members of the department may know, Pauline was actually cycling to the exam when her cycle was in collision with a Texas Homecare lorry.

"Texas Homecare", did you say, Dr Jarman? I'm trying to make notes.

Yes. As a result of this she was thrown straight into the air and over the parapet of the railway bridge at the bottom of Grange Street. But, as luck would have it, her fall was broken by a passing goods train, and she recovered to find herself lying in an empty coal wagon and moving at some speed in a north westerly direction.

Is that on the Rugby Line?

Yes, it is, sir. Realising this might seriously interfere with her examination chances she managed after a short time to leap from the train and hurl herself down an embankment into a wheat field. But as she staggered to her feet to set off in search of help she was forced to dive for cover to avoid the poisonous crop-spray that was being emitted by a low flying bi-plane, and it was only after a full half-hour that the plane moved to an adjoining location and she felt it safe to make for the road.

Yes, I think I've got all that.

She was then fortunate enough, at least so she thought at the time, to hail a passing motorcyclist, who offered her a lift. But, tragically, the young man turned out to be a member of a local satanic cult, and Pauline was only allowed to continue her journey to the examination hall after fully participating in a number of highly obnoxious ceremonies. Some of these, sir. I understand, actually involved the consumption of reptilian organs.

And this would, I take it, be more-or-less on the outskirts of Rugby?

Yes, sir.

And then she found her way to the examination hall?

Yes, sir.

Well, thank you very much indeed for bringing us up to date on that one. Let us address some of the central problems here. Is there a medical note, Dr Jarman?

I'm afraid not, sir. Pauline did set off towards the medical centre immediately after the examination but was unfortunate enough to be felled by a bolt of lightning on her way.

Well, overall there doesn't appear to be much we can do to raise the mark.

You mean the lack of a medical note, sir?

Not exactly, Dr Jarman, although of course that is an important consideration.

No, I think it is more the question of the danger of setting a precedent.

Finally, when we at the University of Poppleton considered Richard Winter's paper (*see Section Three*) and the various issues arising from it, one point which we found, I must say, to be incorrigibly sentimental, is the idea that the process of classification has something to do with marking a student for life. Quite the contrary. I think that most students coming out of the system fully recognise the fairness o' what they have gone

through, and come very quickly to accept their classification of degree as being a fair representation of their own particular abilities. For example, here is a transcript of a conversation I had with a student only yesterday. I wrote it down and thought that I would bring it and read it to you today, in order to contradict some of the ideas being entertained and introduced in one or two of the papers and comments today.

Department of Culture and Media Studies. Lapping speaking.

Oh, Professor Lapping, this is Louise Theelan, third year. I'm sorry to bother you, but I wondered if the results were out yet.

Indeed they are, Louise. I have the list in front of me. Let me see now: Theelan.

Ah, yes, here we are - Well, it's time for congratulations, Louise.

It is?

Oh yes, indeed, many congratulations: you have an excellent lower second.

A lower second?

That's right. Well done, you can relax now. Got any holiday plans?

But I thought I would get an upper second. Dr Quintup said I would have little difficulty getting an upper second.

Well, one person's opinion....

And Mr Bulge's report on my tutorial last term claimed that I clearly had upper second potential. And you yourself wrote on my last essay, "This is upper second work."

Oh, you cannot always generalise.

And all the way through my three years at Poppletton, I've never had an essay marked below an upper second.

You know, Louise, I think I am beginning to sense the nature of your little problem.

What you have been suffering from is a little bit of over confidence.

Over confidence?

You had over confidently presumed that there would be some relationship between your own ability and our system of assessment. Am I right?

Well, I.....

Well, don't you worry about that now. Remember, you can always count on a good reference from this department. Now I must rush; it seems to be my turn to take the external examiners to the station. Bye, Louise! And, Louise....

Professor Lapping?

Good luck with the rest of your life.

Thank you very much.

**SUBSEQUENT WRITTEN COMMENTS
SUBMITTED BY CONFERENCE PARTICIPANTS**

**FROM;
Anne Leyland
Assistant University Entrance Requirements Office
University of London**

Given the premise that classification will in time be replaced by a more discriminating system of marking achievement, some of the issues which will need to be addressed, as I see it are:

- * What form of grading should be used if a national system of grading is adopted? Should it measure outcomes, as with National Vocational Qualifications, using a simple pass/fail terminology or at most distinguishing between pass, fail, merit and distinction? If it retains the widespread practice of marking in percentages, how will the bands of marks be differentiated - the London University Working Party's ideas, embodied in the draft transcript attached to the Report (*see Section Three*) are only one possibility.
- * Related to the above question is the relationship between degrees and entrance qualifications. Modular A levels do reflect the principle of assessing each unit contributing to the final result, but the A level grade system is still very much in place. NVQs and GNVQs measure outcomes, using pass, fail, merit, and distinction where any grading is done, but A levels are still the main entry route to degree courses. The modularisation of A levels is likely to affect degree structure and assessment. Equally, abandonment of classification might well affect the A level grading system in the long term and perhaps lead to its abandonment.
- * A question not raised at the conference is: if classification is abandoned what becomes of the Honours degree? Under the former CNAA rules a distinction was made between ordinary and Honours degrees in terms of content, and that difference was reflected in the

Credit Transfer schemes developed in the CNAA system. But for many older universities, including London, the ordinary or pass degree is now merely a possible classification, marking a student on an Honours course as not having achieved Honours standard. In my view if classification is abandoned the term 'Honours' will no longer be appropriate (since it will no longer be appropriate to speak of 'First Class Honours' etc) and the concept of the 'ordinary' degree may also need to be rethought.

These are of course only a few of the many issues raised by this debate. Probably the foremost question, if classification is abandoned, is how to develop a nationally recognised and consistent grading scheme to replace it.

FROM;
Max Weaver
Vice Provost
London Guildhall University

My main thought during the very useful conference was that, although the case for the abolition of degree classification was not investigated in full detail and consequently was not made out, there is a very clear case for an improvement in the information which is given to graduates and, hence, to employers about the performance of graduates.

FROM:
Tony Voller
Head of Resourcing Services
British Airways

I left the seminar with the view that a lot of energy and passion existed within the academic fraternity regarding classification, but that there was a degree of remoteness from the employers' perspective in the debate. I was particularly sorry to see so few representatives from employers' organisations at the conference as I feel that an effective partnership is vital at all stages of this ongoing debate.

The views on organisations' needs expressed by Margaret Murray provide a useful broad overview to concerns and issues that employers are facing. In my own organisation, we are currently looking at a number of related issues, namely: how do we recruit, retain and develop general managers and specialist managers; how do we accurately predict future manpower needs? Thus, we are dealing with complex organisational issues which may potentially hinder our ability to predict our future manpower needs with a degree of certainty. However, BA like many other organisations, is investing considerable time and energy to forecast these requirements as accurately as we can, and I recall this was an issue raised at the conference which was felt to be an essential component of the future debate and decision making process.

I would also highlight that we are currently undertaking a project which is seeking to validate our graduate selection processes and evaluate the "quality" of candidates applying to BA's intake programmes. This piece of work may well at some later stage provide some useful information on what we as an employer seek and value in those who apply to us from University.

FROM:
Professor Keith Chapman
Head of Department
Department of Geography
University of Aberdeen

Concern about the appropriateness of the classified honours degree as an indication of the quality of graduates is nothing new. The implications of being 'marked for life' were noted more than 20 years ago in an attack which focused on the opaque nature of the decision making procedures involved in classifying students. It is not only the secrecy of these procedures that has been questioned, but also their reliability. Numerous studies have drawn attention to variability in patterns of degree results between disciplines and institutions. A smaller number have noted the existence of differences at subject level between one department and another. Attempts to 'explain' these latter differences have left many unanswered questions and a considerable sense of unease about the effectiveness of the external examiner system in discharging its primary responsibility for ensuring comparability of standards.

The conference identified several factors which are reinforcing these long-established doubts about the reliance upon the classified honours degree as the most appropriate indicator of output quality. An inevitable and entirely reasonable wish for a more transparent system is consistent with a move towards greater accountability in Higher Education. Assessment methods designed to test skills and competencies beyond those traditionally emphasised by 'Final' examination are difficult to accommodate within the classified honours degree. Ultimately, there are very real differences in the 'quality' of graduates as measured in various attributes, and an abandonment of the classified honours degree should not be regarded as a denial of this fact of life. Higher Education has a responsibility to potential employers to make sensitive and informed judgements on these differences. The existing system fails to do this because it conceals more than it reveals. Anybody with experience of examiners' meetings is familiar with the hairline decisions

determining the labels which have such an important bearing on the future prospects of students. Furthermore, the within-class variability is much greater than that between classes at the boundaries. In these circumstances, the degree classifications can be seriously misleading. Furthermore, the operation of this system forces teachers to make agonising decisions in the highly-charged atmosphere of the examiners' meeting. A more precise and open system based on profiles or transcripts would provide a better framework for the necessary qualitative judgements and would also remove much of the trauma (for staff and students) of seeking to force individuals within the strait jacket of a very crude classification system.

FROM:

Dr R A Higham
Faculty of Arts

Dr David Buckingham
Director, Staff Development Unit

University of Exeter

In Exeter, there has been discussion of these issues over the last two years. The debate was initiated by the Faculty of Arts and was later extended to other parts of the University. Originally conceived as a discussion about classification or non-classification, the debate developed into a discussion about automatically issued "transcripts with classification" in order to draw in a wider range of opinion. The Arts Faculty drew up a model for such a transcript, which, with a few amendments, was accepted in principle by the University's Teaching Committee. At the moment, the University is looking into ways through which such a system might be implemented.

In short, Exeter is among those Universities where transcripts are under serious discussion. As many people said at the conference, this does seem to be a practical way forward which individual Universities can take. But the wider issue of classification is one which must be tackled nationally.

FROM:
Dr Felicia Gordon
Principal Lecturer
Faculty of Humanities, Arts, and Education
Anglia Polytechnic University

The call for openness in the awarding of degrees through the use of transcripts was welcome but I am not entirely convinced by the arguments of those who wish to abandon classification.

I remain a dinosaur in relation to competency marking. The problem seems to me to lie in its inappropriateness for open-ended or speculative subjects. Whereas, if someone were to operate on my gall-bladder, I would want them to show competency, rather than originality and flair, nevertheless there are a number of academic disciplines where the latter are rightly valued and where competence is only the lowest common denominator.

Competency testing also seems to lead to the so-called 'closed question' so criticised in the Schools English examinations. Closed outcomes fatally suggest closed minds. Is this what 'Higher' Education is supposed to be about?

Coming from the American system (BA, Radcliffe-Harvard; Ph.D, Berkeley), I have valued the external scrutiny afforded both by the CNAA and external examiners (both institutions rather ridiculed in the context of this conference) and am convinced that my own institution, formerly CCAT, now part of Anglia Polytechnic University, would not have become a University without the academic pressure/leverage exercised by these two groups. The existence of independent external monitoring of standards should not be abandoned. Though the present system may be ramshackle, surely we should be aiming to improve it rather than to scrap it. Similarly, degree classification is not simply a stick with which to beat individual students but part of the concept of standards and capable of a clear definition. In my experience classification was carried out with extreme care and with endless discussion of particular student profiles. It is far less arbitrary and certainly not as fatally damaging for all future career prospects as was suggested by speakers at the conference.

Finally a pragmatic point on the abolition of classification. Unless there were a national agreement to move in this direction, we would be in danger of creating a two tier system with some institutions offering 'unclassified degrees' and more traditional universities retaining classified degrees. Students at a former polytechnic, for example where staff have struggled for years under unequal funding systems to raise standards to university level, would be severely disadvantaged, particular in employment terms, if their institutions chose the 'unclassified' route. Degree classification would almost certainly be replaced by institution classification, as in the USA. If we jump, perhaps we would all jump at once. Finally, the call for national standards to replace the present spatch-cock system is perhaps utopian, but something we should be working towards. However, one would hope it would be a concept of standards that rewards all aspects of attainment including 'originality and flair'.

FROM:
Professor Brandon Taylor
Winchester School of Art
Department of History of Art and Design

I have for many years been urging colleagues to rethink the marking bands normally used for degree classifications, not least because they distort the final results mathematically and therefore morally when used for modular degrees, or degrees with two or more component parts. They also mean next to nothing to many students and employers, and for this reason the course of which I am the leader, an MA course in the History of Art and Design, has recently moved to a gradeless assessment scheme for a trial period.

I personally would like to see this extended to the undergraduate degrees, particularly in fine Art. However, I have no mandate to express more than my own view on this, and I am writing in a personal capacity.

FROM:
Dr C Brooks
Pro-Vice Chancellor
University of Sussex at Brighton

My own view of the matter - and it is a purely personal one is that:

- 1) Some form of discrimination between students is essential; that may be achieved by use of a grade point average.
- 2) We should not be over impressed by demands that we fit in with the requirements of employers.
- 3) It is not in any case clear to me that there is a monolithic group of 'employers'. Many students become self-employed.
- 4) The request of the British Academy for an indication of the achievement of a potential post-graduate in the paper(s) most relevant to proposed post-graduate study shows that simple classification is already necessarily supplemented.
- 5) Any new system of assessment should not increase the administrative and reporting roles of academic faculty.
- 6) It would be interesting to see how easy universities would find it to transfer termly reports on student progress into more formal records of achievements.

FROM:
Rhodri Phillips
Deputy Vice Chancellor
South Bank University London

The conference raised some large issues which are currently occupying attention at this University among others. I would like to make three points.

First: whether employers take account of the classification of degrees when they recruit graduates. I have consulted the University's Principal Careers Officer on this. Her view is that some large city-based chartered accountancy firms and solicitors firms require an Upper Second as a way of reducing the list of applications, while using as an excuse the intellectual demands of the further training to gain professional qualifications. However, this is not true of similar firms outside London, and is not true of related fields such as certified and management accounting. Some firms such as Marks & Spencer have sophisticated assessment exercises which require a high standard of ability which is less likely to be found in a graduate with a Third, but this is not an automatic barrier to entry. Most employers are apparently looking for Renaissance man or woman with leadership potential, prepared to make decisions and take initiatives. They look for examples of involvement in a wide range of activities at University, and are rarely interested in the subject studied or the degree classification achieved. Students need to be educated on the need (in terms of their future careers) to do more than concentrate exclusively on their studies while they are at University. I also asked some education experts at the Chemical Industries Association with whom I had lunch last week. They said that chemical companies, who still recruit large numbers of graduates despite the recession, are only interested in degree classifications when they are recruiting "scientists" to work in research facilities; a minimum Upper Second is normally required. Otherwise they are uninterested in degree classifications for posts in engineering or in non-technical areas such as marketing and finance.

Second: the production of transcripts, breaking down courses by year and subject. If marks are shown in the transcript for each of these elements, it seems to me that the transcript merely reinforces the degree classification. Only if the transcript simply shows pass or fail will it undermine the emphasis on degree classifications.

May I conclude with a personal point. Peter Newsam drew attention to the absence of any correlation between degree results and Civil Service entrance. In 1970, I obtained an average Lower Second degree in economics and at the same time sailed through the Administrative Class entrance exams. When I entered the Department of Employment as an Assistant Principal, my first Principal was a young high flyer - Geoffrey Holland! My subsequent career has made my relatively poor degree irrelevant but this is not true of all those whose degree result is a poor indication of their ability.

When I mentioned this to Peter Newsam, he said that his uncle had won a scholarship to Oxford, obtained a fourth and gone on to become Permanent Secretary at the Home Office.

I do hope that degree classifications are ended and I said so to Tim Boswell when he came to lunch earlier this week. I do not think that he was convinced.

FROM:
Dr D E Billing
Pro-Rector
University of Westminster

It is clear that nothing can happen sensibly except on a *national* scale and therefore CVCP must be convinced. Secondly, a viable alternative must be put in place *alongside* Honours before it can replace Honours. This must be a proper profile and *must* involve *assessed* transferable skills.

FRO! I:
Jason Tarsh
Economics Division
Department for Education

I think the conference tended to mix four quite separate criticisms of the degree class system:

- 1) The present system is intrinsically unsatisfactory and arbitrary. We should continue to rank graduates but do this consistently and rationally to clear, transparent criteria.
- 2) The present system is inadequate particularly for the needs of employers. Degree classes should be supplemented with details of what courses each graduate has taken and how they performed. (This is a twin track approach and could leave the traditional degree classification system as it is).
- 3) Growing use of modular degrees undermines the concept of a degree class. The practical difficulties are too great and we should aim for a "menu" of marks, a record of achievement. There would still be scope for an overall mark.
- 4) (Superficially similar to the above but with quite different implications) We should cease to try to sort graduates into a hierarchy. There is a 'New Higher Education' which emphasises transferable skills and positive achievements. This tends to go hand in hand with modular courses but it is the change in purpose of HE that fundamentally casts doubt on the idea of grading achievement.

Put another way: the debate splits into those who want to rank graduates and those who do not. The former group then splits into advocates of different methods and these in turn split into different views on the purpose of assessment. Mixed in with these there are also, of course, those who say one thing but really believe another! In particular, I wonder if modular courses might be an excuse rather than a reason to end classification.

SECTION THREE

BACKGROUND PAPERS

"DISTINCTIONS OF CLASS"
EDITORIAL,
TIMES HIGHER EDUCATION SUPPLEMENT
3rd May, 1991, p.40

Britain is almost the only country which obsessively grades the performance of graduates into first-class honours, two-ones, two twos, thirds, passes and so on. The few other examples of this refined class consciousness are to be found in countries which have been deeply influenced by British academic tradition. Not a happy export. And at home our instinct is to further refine rather than to abandon an already too elaborate degree classification. The talk now is of certificates that contain a full record of students' work down to the last percentage mark awarded, or of further division, splitting the third class perhaps! (THES, this issue, page 8).

The rest of the world manages without these fine distinctions. Across the rest of Europe and in the United States students just pass or they pass *magna* or *summa cum laude*; the approximate British equivalent would be a classification that recognised only firsts and left most graduates with unadorned degrees. Employers in these countries have little difficulty deciding which graduates to hire; nor do their systems of research and post-graduate training seem any worse for this refusal to grade undergraduate success.

Why do we do it? The true, but despairing, answer is that it is just another example of the British (English?) class system. We are constantly trying to invent clubs where none need exist, so that we can savour the satisfaction of excluding some of our fellow citizens. Maybe the motivation is less deliberate. Our public culture and private behaviour are so pervaded by vague notions of class that it is difficult to imagine either in other terms. To fly by British Airways is to experience the ambience of our class system; it is in the announcements, the decor, the body language; there is no escape from its subtle

suffocation, although it serves no purpose save conveying an impression of "English-ness". Perhaps it has to be the same with higher education.

However, it is difficult to dismiss degree classification as a quaint custom. It serves ruthless contemporary purposes. Students who want to continue on to postgraduate courses are divided into those with "good" degrees, firsts and two-ones, and those with others - to call them "bad" degrees, of course, would be dreadfully impolite. Only the first group is eligible for the public support which in effect governs access to postgraduate education. Employers, most shamefully perhaps public employers like the Civil Service, divide graduates into the elect and the damned along the same lines.

More recently the effectiveness of institutions has begun to be measured in terms of the proportion of their graduates gaining these "good" degrees. Even if some countervailing discount is allowed for the A-level quality of their intake, this pecking order remains among the most pernicious performance indicators. And degree classifications are even used as political ammunition, enabling ministers to claim that universities cannot pretend to be underfunded nor polytechnics demand a halt to "efficiency gains" so long as their output of "good" graduates is increasing.

In fact, degree classifications are a sham. There is little consistency across subjects, institutions, years. The differentials (of ability? achievement?) they claim to measure are impossibly narrow. And the entire apparatus is a historical accident. Originally most students took ordinary degrees with only a minority seeking honours. In a wider access and more democratic system there must be a return to this older and worthier pattern.

"AN END TO THE CLASS SYSTEM?"

GEOFFREY ALDERMAN

*THE GUARDIAN, 15th June, 1993, p.6**

The annual round of university examinations will soon draw to a close. In due course, pass lists will be published in which candidates will have their degrees divided into First, Upper Seconds, Lower Seconds and Thirds - Britain's other class system.

The classified honours system, copied in the former Empire but unknown in the US and elsewhere in Europe, is of recent origin.

We know that at Cambridge, in the 16th century, the Regius Professor of Divinity, using what we would now call norm-referencing took to dividing candidates into three groups: the best 25 per cent, the next 50 per cent and the bottom 25 per cent. In Cambridge, certainly until the first world war, different subjects were assessed and classified in different ways. In classics there were three classes, each further subdivided into three divisions; in law, there was a rank ordering of every candidate. At Oxford until the 1970s Second class was undivided, but there were also Fourths. To get a fourth (as did a former Lord Chancellor, now deceased) was a remarkable achievement, which seems to have enhanced rather than restricted career prospects.

What exactly do these categories mean? Of what use are they? Why subdivide the Second Class, but not the Firsts or the Thirds?

In my experience it is generally the Upper Seconds who make the best research students. There is a tradition of awarding Firsts to candidates in history and politics whose scripts sparkle in an analytical and literary sense. These scripts are the products of minds geared to written examinations, but which often fail to cope with the task of spending years sifting through documentary and other evidence and making good sense of it all.

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We ought to change the system of assessment. Much less emphasis should be placed upon the four-answers-in-three-hours examination format and much more upon a range of assessment methods, including greater emphasis on project work and even on oral examinations (as many polyversities are doing). As a result the rank ordering of humanities graduates would be very different. Life is not lived under examination conditions.

Perhaps more importantly, the system of classification is not understood in the wider world. When I agreed to chair a University of London enquiry into the classification of non-medical first degrees (the medics have never used the classification system), I found that few employers had the foggiest notion of what actually differentiated the Lower Seconds from the Uppers, save for a vague idea that the latter must be, in some undefined sense, better than the former, and that the firsts were best of all. But best at what?

In politics and contemporary history, a candidate with five Alpha marks out of nine could gain a first, even though two of the Alphas were Beta-Alpha rather than Alpha-Beta - if you are still following. A candidate with five Alphas including two Beta-Alphas will end up with a first but one with three Beta-Alphas, and only two Alpha-Betas, could end up with an Upper Second. This brand he or she will carry for life.

In a spirit of glasnost the secrecy of the Final Examinations Board has been breached. What has been revealed is a complete lack of consistency within subjects, across disciplines, and between universities. Far more important is the need to provide students with documents which give them, and their prospective employers, much more information about the courses taken during their undergraduate careers, the grades obtained, and guidance as to what these grades actually mean.

One possible solution that has emerged is the idea of a transcript. It has been proposed that all students entering London University will be given such a document - commonplace in European and American Universities - at whatever point they exit from the system. At the

moment we intend that this transcript will include a classification, but its importance and mystique will be deliberately undermined by the amount of additional information the transcript contains. The removal of the classification can be effected at the touch of a computer button.

The abolition of classification has nothing to do with the maintenance of standards. Indeed, the assessment of scripts and other forms of work will be more rigorous than before because, for each component of an assessed course, publicly available criteria will have to exist if they have not already been formulated. The crude, broad-sweep degree class, concealing a multitude of sins, will be replaced by a much more revealing document.

In the polyversities, some of which have been extraordinarily innovative in their approach to assessment methods, I detect wide-spread dissatisfaction with the class system. But, understandably, the newest universities lack the confidence to undertake abolition by themselves. In the older universities there has also been ferment. Together, we must now take a step that will enhance the value of the service we provide to the taxpayer, by giving our graduates and those who employ them relevant information. The class system must go.

UNIVERSITY OF LONDON ACADEMIC COUNCIL
WORKING GROUP ON CLASSIFICATION OF FIRST DEGREES:
FINAL REPORT

1 Introduction

The Working Group was set up by the Academic Council on 24 June 1991 with the following terms of reference:

- 1:1 To inquire into the present method of classifying non-medical first degrees in the University of London, and to make such recommendations as may be thought appropriate, having regard to the view of the academic community of the University and after having consulted such bodies and interests outside the University as shall be deemed proper.
- 1.2 The membership agreed by Academic Council was as follows:

Professor G Alderman (Chairman) Chairman, Academic Council.

Professor J M Charap (QMW) Physics

Dr R A Dawe (IC) Engineering]

Professor D R Diamond (LSE) Geography

Professor R A Hudson (UCL) Linguistics

Professor J E Martin (KCL) Law

Professor G L Williams (Institute of Education) Educational Administration

Ms A A Win (President, ULU)

Professor K B Saunders, Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, was invited to attend as an Observer.

- 1.3 The Working Group has met on four occasions, and circulated an interim report in February 1992 to Schools for comments. At its last meeting the Working group discussed the replies from Schools and revised some of its recommendations in the light of the comments received.
- 1.4 The discussions of the Working Group also took account of other developments within and outside the University, in particular the brief of the JPC Working Party chaired by Professor Gowar and the development in the University of credit accumulation and transfer schemes. The CVCP proposal for a common transcript and the Diploma Supplement promoted by the Council of Europe were both drawn to the Group's attention.
- 1.5 Discussion ranged over many aspects of assessment. In addition to its main proposals the Working Group has made a number of recommendations to the Academic Council Working Party on Academic Audit and to the JPC Working Party chaired by Professor Gowar, which are included in Annex 3 of this report.
- 1.6 A list of the outside bodies consulted about the principal proposal of the Working Group is appended to this report as Annex 5.

2 Report

- 2.1 The principal proposal of the Working Group is to adopt a uniform transcript for all degree courses at the University of London outside the Faculty of Medicine while at the same time retaining the classification of degrees for at least a five year period. For the University to move unilaterally to abandon classification is thought to be unwise in that we do not think that it would command a sufficient degree of support at present from within or outside the University.

The Group does consider that the question of classification should be reviewed within five years and no later. The pressures of increased student mobility, the growth of modular degrees and a developing credit transfer system make it likely that classification will prove increasingly difficult to award. Arguments for and against retaining the classification of first degrees are set out in Annex 2.

- 2.2 A transcript sufficiently detailed to allow outside bodies to know the main subjects which the student has studied, the quality of the student's performance in those subjects and his/her overall attainment to date would be more informative than a certificate simply stating degree classification. If it were established in tandem with degree classification it would allow smooth transition from the present system to one without classification.
- 2.3 The response from the Schools has indicated that there are some worries about the resource implications of a uniform transcript, and that the preference is for a transcript containing no more than the information listed in para. 1.1. (e) of Annex 1. The Group considered that additional information would be helpful to students at the start of their course but need not appear on the transcript. The format and content of the transcript will need further discussion with Schools, and it may take some time for Schools to set up the systems needed to produce it. For these reasons the Group is recommending that the transcript is not routinely issued to students until the 1992 intake of students completes the course, although it could, if available, be issued on request to those of the 1992 intake leaving before completion of the course.
- 2.4 Regarding the marking of individual courses or units it is desirable that the University should move towards a common system of marking using numbers rather than letter grades, so that information on the transcript is consistent and easily interpreted by outside bodies. The Group notes, however, that there are

some inconsistencies in practice between boards of examiners across the university, of which boards may not themselves be aware. These differences concern not only the choice between numbers and letters, but also the relations between marks (or letters) and the degree classes into which they are ultimately translated. It is the Group's firm view that openness about marking schemes is essential to the successful use of transcripts and that such openness would itself in the course of time lead to the resolution of the most obvious inconsistencies between examining boards.

- 2.5 Regarding the classification of degrees, the Group is aware of considerable inconsistencies among examining boards here too. So long as classification continues, the Group strongly recommends that the basis of classification by each examining board should be made available both to candidates and to other examining boards (who are again probably unaware of the extent of the inconsistencies), and that the regulation which forbids the publication of classification schemes should be rescinded.
- 2.6 What should appear on transcripts, if these are to be helpful, is a general statement of the standard of attainment represented by a given class of degree or mark. If a consistent scheme of marking were adopted throughout the University the general statement of standard of attainment would hold good whether applied to degree classes, overall average marks, or marks for individual courses. One model of how the classes of degree might be defined is given in paragraphs 2.2/2.3 of Annexe 1. It is felt that it is more informative to define classes of degree (as long as they continued) in terms of the typical or average mark (e.g. a typical II ii = 55%) than in terms of classification boundaries since it is at the boundaries that the differences are least clear. However, if classification were abandoned, it would be possible to apply the same definitions to a range of marks.

- 2.7 The transcripts currently issued by the Federal University carry a statement that personal circumstances and factors other than examination marks may have been taken into account when determining the class of degree. A similar statement should appear on the transcript for so long as degrees are classified but there should be no indication on an individual transcript that discretion has been exercised in that particular case.
- 2.8 In addition to questions directly related to its main proposal, the Working Group looked at other aspects of assessment procedure. A key consideration is to ensure both that assessment procedures are fair and that they are seen to be fair.

3 Recommendations

3.1 Main proposal

- a) that the University of London should routinely issue all Internal and External students outside the Faculty of Medicine registered for degrees in and after October 1992 with a transcript of results when their degree course is completed and that a transcript should be issued to students at whatever point they exit from the University.
- b) that this transcript should include an agreed amount of information sufficient for the purposes of outside bodies such as employers, research councils, receiving institution of Higher Education etc;
- c) that the same basic format should be used whether the transcript records interim or final results on a degree course;

- d) that the classification of first degrees should be retained by the University of London for a period of five years from the acceptance of the Working Group's report (the position to be reviewed within that period);
- e) that the transcript should be issued in tandem with degree classification so that a smooth transition can be effected, if and when desired, from classification to a system where all information on attainment is recorded on the transcript, the degree certificate recording only the award of the degree and the main field of study.

ANNEXE 1

PROPOSAL FOR UNIFORM TRANSCRIPT FOR FIRST DEGREE COURSES

1. Content of Transcript

1.1 The transcript should:

- a) be issued at whatever point the student exists from the course.
- b) contain sufficient information to allow outside bodies such as employers, institutions of Higher Education, Research Councils, to know the main subjects which the student has studied, the quality of the student's performance in those subjects and his/her overall attainment to date;
- c) indicate all institutions at which studies leading to the award of the degree were undertaken, periods of study abroad, the length of time taken to complete these studies (including length of time for studies which are being offered for credit transfer purposes) and the credit points (under the CNAA CATS scheme) awarded for those studies;
- d) be compatible with any nationally agreed format for transcripts (whether for credit transfer purposes, as developments of the Diploma supplement scheme, or extensions of Records of Achievement);
- e) therefore contain at least the following information:
 - i) Student's full name
 - ii) Student's date of birth
 - iii) Title of degree awarded
 - iv) Main field(s) of study
 - v) School at which registered at time of award of degree
 - vi) Date of registration at School
 - vii) Mode of study (PT/FT)

- viii) List of each course unit/subject studied with credit points under the CNAA CATS scheme and mark or grade gained (including fail marks), weighting or conversion of mark or grade, indication of the year when the mark/grade was awarded and the awarding institution if other than the School of attendance at the time of the award of the degree.
 - ix) Classification of degree
 - x) Normal minimum duration of full-time course leading to degree in the main field of study
 - xi) Criteria for assigning marks to performance (see Section)
- 1.2 The format of the transcript for External Students will be different from the above and will need to be discussed with the Committee for External Students.

2. General Criteria for Assigning Marks to Performance

- 2.1 If general criteria for the award of a degree class or percentage are to appear on the degree transcript they should.
- a) preferably be linked to a universally applied grading system which is tied in with degree classification, as long as degree classification is used;
 - b) be applicable to all degree courses;
 - c) be consistent from class to class - ie it should not appear that different qualities are looked for at different levels, only that different standards are achieved;
 - d) be brief;
 - e) be framed in a positive rather than a negative way - i.e. avoid terms like 'superficial', 'inaccurate' etc.

- 2.2 Criteria for the award of a degree class/percentage could appear as a simple statement of the standard of attainment (as in some other European countries, e.g. Germany) achieved in each class. The example below following the Working Group's recommendation (para. 2.4 of report) links the class of degree to a notional 'typical' mark (in practice this will obviously vary until a common marking scheme is established):

Typical Percentage Mark Class	Degree Attainment	Standard of
75%	I	Excellent
65%	II i	Very Good
55%	II ii	Good
45%	III	Adequate
35-39%	Pass	Min. acceptable
0-34%	Fail	Unacceptable

The above scheme should be adaptable to a system where an overall average mark is recorded on a transcript rather than a degree classification. It might then be necessary to define percentage bands in terms of standard of attainment (e.g. 60-69 = good).

- 2.3 The difficulty is to compile a sufficiently comprehensive statement of the criteria to apply to degrees and courses in all subject areas. It has been suggested that the following general statement could preface the table of standards of attainment set out above:

'Detailed criteria for assessment differ from subject to subject and may be found in subject syllabuses' (see also recommendation 1b in Annex 3).

ANNEXE 2

A NOTE ON THE CLASSIFICATION OF DEGREES

The classification of non-medical first degrees into First, Upper Seconds, Lower Seconds, Thirds and Passes'without Honours' is now general in British Universities. Its origins may be traced to the practice in Oxford and Cambridge universities, adopted in London and then in the 'municipal' universities that were developed in English provincial centres in the 19th century. The system was not always as it is now. Until the 1980s the Second Class was not divided at Oxford, which also, however, awarded Fourths. The universities which were established in the post-Robbins expansion were expected to follow the general pattern, and the decision of Oxford to all into line marked the triumph of the 'class' system, which is used by the Research councils and the Civil Service as the basis upon which their recruitment policies are based.

Originally, the primary aim of the class system was to distinguish the highest-fliers - the Firsts - from those whose performance was judged to be merely satisfactory. Those whose performance fell between these two categories were awarded Seconds. The second Class degree covered a multitude of sins - from those who had just missed a First to those whose performance was very little better than merely satisfactory. In time, therefore, the Second Class was divided to reflect these very substantial differences.

The class system is not generally followed either in Europe or in North America. It has the merit of simplicity, and even though its unfairness at the borderlines is generally acknowledged, it is argued that this is to some extent offset by the very wide bands of ability which each class encompasses. The Class system is also a useful piece of shorthand summarising performance over perhaps a multitude of separate pieces of assessed academic work. The 'first class' mind has entered popular jargon, and is (so it is said) widely understood. The system itself is in truth regarded as a gold standard, a guarantee (so to speak) of academic standards in the higher education sector.

It is the very simplicity of the system, however, which has caused its ultimate validity to be questioned: the class categories are so broad that (against the background of increasingly complex and increasingly diverse modular degree programmes) their ultimate meaning must now be in doubt. The class system has not in general been adopted in relation to Masters degrees, or in relation to the PhD - though there is a world of difference between the PhD thesis whose brilliance is apparent on every page, and that which had to be referred back for extensive revision, and which was only ultimately accepted after a great deal of thought and a gruelling *viva voce* examination. It is well known, incidentally, that the best PhD research students are not necessarily those with Firsts: the qualities of memory, quick-thinking under stress, consistently high performance under written-examination conditions across many different fields, and (in the humanities) sheer brilliance of style are not necessarily those which will either make a good researcher or lead to the successful completion of a doctoral thesis. A former Lord Chancellor obtained a fourth and an eminent Professor in the legal field only managed a Third.

The merit of the class system is that it enables lines to be drawn, and indeed demands that this be done. But the ultimate value and legitimacy of that line is now under serious question. Again, where a Board of Examiners meets to classify degree performance in respect of examinations which they themselves have set, classification might be said to be underpinned by personal knowledge and personal involvement. But, with the spread of modular programmes, this situation often and increasingly no longer pertains, so that classification amounts to nothing more than a mere averaging of results. Would it not be better simply to give these individual results, and allow prospective employers, etc, to average them if that is what they wish.

ANNEXE 3

ADDITIONAL PROPOSALS OF THE WORKING GROUP

- 1 The Working Group recommends the following additional proposals to the Academic Council Working Party on Academic Audit, as being outside its own remit but in accord with the policies of the Academic Council and with the principle that assessment procedures should be fair and should be seen to be fair:
 - a) that Boards of Examiners should develop sets of criteria for the assessment of individual course unit courses (or equivalent);
 - b) that both the criteria used for assessing individual course unit courses (or equivalent) and the schemes for classifying first degrees should be published and the regulation forbidding such publication be rescinded;
 - c) that examination scripts clearly indicate the script has been scrutinised by two examiners, preferably by two internal examiners;
 - d) that the proceedings of boards of examiners assessing students for first degrees be minuted;
 - e) that the University move towards a system of standardised marking using percentages rather than letter grades;
 - f) that the University move towards a system of identifying scripts in written examinations by candidate number only.

2 The Working Group recommends to the JPC Working Party on Undergraduate Education that the information provided to all students at the start of degree courses should include the following:

- a) workload (e.g. average hours per week of contact time in each year)
- b) methods of assessment
- c) criteria for assessment
- d) academic and professional rights conferred by the qualification gained (e.g. the holder is eligible to apply to an MSc degree course, to apply for qualified teacher status etc)
- e) opportunities for transfer

In making this recommendation the Working Group seeks to underline current good practice and ensure that it is adopted throughout the University.

Medical first degree are not classified: the pass mark is relatively high; a technique of medical practice is either mastered or it is not; results from individual elements of the degrees are available on demand. It would of course be possible for medical first degrees to be classified, but there is no pressure to move in this direction. The philosophy underpinning non-classification in medicine could well be applied elsewhere in the university system.

Geoffrey Alderman

Chairman, Academic Council

ANNEXE 5

LIST OF INSTITUTIONS TO BE CONSULTED OVER TRANSCRIPT

- 1 Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)
- 2 Science and Engineering Research Council (SERC)
- 3 Natural Environment Research Council (NERC)
- 4 Medical Research Council (MRC)
- 5 Agricultural and Food Research Council (AFRC)
- 6 British Academy
- 7 Royal Society
- 8 Confederation of British Industry (CBI)
- 9 Council for Industry and Higher Education
- 10 Civil Service Commission
- 11 Association of Graduate Recruiters
- 12 Careers Advisory Service
- 13 Engineering Council
- 14 Law Society
- 15 Bar Council

ANNEXE 6

SUMMARY OF REPLIES FROM INSTITUTIONS CONSULTED

- 1 To date (27 May 1992) nine institutions have replied to our request for comments on the proposal for a uniform transcript:

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)

The Science and Engineering Research Council (SERC)

The Natural Environment Research Council (NERC)

The Medical Research Council (MRC)

The Agricultural and Food Research Council

The British Academy

The Association of Graduate Recruiters

The Law Society

The Bar Council

- 2 All those who replied supported the proposal and were generally satisfied with the proposed format, although the Medical Research Council considered that a uniform transcript for graduates from all UK, if not EC, universities would be more useful.

- 3 Specific points raised, which would need to be taken into consideration when the details of the transcript are worked out with Schools:

- a) instead of a typical percentage mark for each band of classification, it would be more helpful, especially to employers, to indicate the upper and lower limits to each band (ESRC, NERC).

- b) The transcript will need to be supplemented by other information that is usually included in a CV (eg address, nationality, referees, etc). (MRC)

- c) The grading of research projects in science degree courses should be shown (MRC)
 - d) The marks column is of limited value without some standardisation of data (e.g. which decile does the mark fall in?) (MRC). An international standard for the range of marks within a degree category would be a useful long-term aim (NERC).
 - e) The reasons why a mark has not been counted towards the final result need to be clarified (MRC).
 - f) The reason for exit from a course, if other than completion, could be included (ACRG).
 - g) The transcript could be made available to students while they are still on the course to show their achievements before final examinations, to help those selected for employment while they are still undergraduates (ACRG).
 - h) As much information as possible would be appreciated on the means by which exemption or prior credit has been given (the Law Society).
4. Many statements of support were very positive. Several commented that the extra information included in the transcript would be more useful than the mere information that a student had obtained a certain class of degree. In particular, the detailed comments of the NERC and the Bar Council should be noted:
- a) "We believe a transcript of the kind drafted would be useful both to potential employers, and to supervisors considering graduates as potential research or advanced course students, in that the component courses (and diversity of

subject matter) of a degree may vary widely for degrees that bear the same general title. It is also administratively useful to the home department, enabling that department easily to provide detailed information on the courses taken by a particular postgraduate, when asked to do so by employers, or other educational bodies (such as US universities, who often seek such elaboration).” (NERC).

- b) “In the long term the new format will expedite our process and enable us effectively to keep track of a student’s progress especially where credit transfer and records at other institutions are involved. It will save us a great deal of effort in contacting the student and other institution(s) concerned.” (the Bar Council).

**"EDUCATION OR GRADING?
ARGUMENTS FOR A NON-SUBDIVIDED HONOURS DEGREE"**

RICHARD WINTER

STUDIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION.

*Volume 18, No. 3, 1993 **

ABSTRACT *A fundamental difficulty prevents the incorporation of recent higher education (HE) initiatives ('enterprise', 'capability', etc) into the basic HE course structure. The new initiatives are based on the explicit description of complex learning outcomes, and therefore require criterion-referenced, pass-fail assessment. The classified honours degree, the centre of the current HE course structure, is (in contrast) a norm-referenced format which requires the comparison of candidates with each other. The full implementation of the new initiatives therefore require the replacement of the classified honours degree with a non-subdivided honours degree, awarded on a pass-fail basis. Such a change would be a valuable educational reform, since the existence and continued influence of the classified honours degree is not a consequence of any justifiable curriculum theory but an historical and a cultural phenomenon, explicable in terms of widespread but questionable common-sense practices, by the ambiguities of the university tradition, and by the universities' current role in social selection.*

Introduction: Higher Education Innovations and the Problem of Assessment

Recent innovations in the work of United Kingdom higher education institutions have begun to transform some important conceptions. Course structures are now likely to be modular and to allow credit accumulation and transfer, which has involved rethinking notions of 'progression'. The move to widen access to higher education has expanded our idea of an undergraduate to include "candidates qualified as much by experience as by

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examinations" (Ball, 1990, p. 36). It is now increasingly proposed that a degree level curriculum may legitimately include knowledge derived from work-based learning (Duckenfield & Stirner, 1992) and the accreditation of prior experiential learning (Evans, 1988). Partnership schemes between universities and employers are beginning to suggest that notions of 'teaching staff' may need to be expanded to include work place 'mentors' providing support, guidance and assessment during periods of work-based learning incorporated into sandwich courses and professional degrees (Employment Department, 1990), and even in otherwise academically focused courses. 'Assessment' may include profiling (Assiter & Fenwick, 1992) and self-assessment by students (Duckenfield & Stirner, 992, p. 33).

But what has not changed, in spite of these major developments, is the basic assessment format, the classified honours degree; and it is the main purpose of this paper to argue that the newly flexible conceptions of higher education curriculum structures and definitions of knowledge require a new assessment format at the centre of the higher education system, namely a non-subdivided honours degree, awarded on a pass/fail basis.

The problem which requires the introduction of a non-subdivided honours degree can be presented in the form of a simple contrast. On the one hand, the broader conceptions of curriculum, learning and knowledge have tended to be associated with assessment formats based on public and detailed specification of criteria and assessment outcomes based on a pass/fail (criterion-referenced) decision. The educational advantages of this format are that it allows increased precision, clarity, and individualisation, and makes the assessment process both informative and supportive. It also means that a positive assessment outcome is potentially available to *all* candidates, as long as they meet the specified criteria. (See Burke 1989; Unit for the Development of Adult Continuing Education (UDACE), 1990; Jessup, 1991).

On the other hand (and in marked contrast), the classified honours degree, the central point of reference for English higher education (Council for National Academic Awards, 1991, p. 65), is basically a norm-referenced system: by definition, only a few candidates can be awarded first class honours, namely those who are 'outstanding' (CNAA 1989a, Regulations 28 and 34); a larger minority will obtain an upper second class degree, those ranked as 'above average' (CNAA, 1989a); and most candidates ('the average') will gain a lower second class degree (CNAA, 1989a). Furthermore, there is no public specification of the nature of the criteria in terms of which this comparative assessment is made (CNAA, 1989b, p. 33). In both respects (the lack of specified criteria and the assumption that assessment outcomes will reflect the pattern of a normal distribution curve), the classified honours degree is fundamentally at variance with the educational philosophy and procedures characteristic of the innovations already referred to, which may be summed up as the 'New Higher Education' (see Winter, 1991).

In response to this problem, the assessment issue is currently being posed in a way which takes for granted the structures and assumptions of the classified honours degree, namely: how can the New Higher Education modes of learning, knowledge, curriculum progression and staffing be accommodated within current assessment categories and procedures? More precisely: can work-based learning, accreditation of prior learning, portfolios of evidence documenting professional competencies, and so on be graded in such a way that they can play their part in contributing to the final classification of the candidate's degree? For example: can the problem be solved simply by attaching more detailed criteria to classes of honours?

My answer to both these questions is: no. Work-based knowledge, prior experiential learning and professional competencies assessed in the work place are too varied, too individual, too context-dependent, too far outside the control of the university, for assessors to have confidence that judgements beyond pass/fail could be agreed as consensual and

accepted as legitimate by those being assessed. The New Higher Education represents a weakening of important boundaries between cultural categories, between academic and non-academic knowledge, between work and learning, between teachers and taught, between the assessors and those being assessed. This creates a shift in the basis of legitimate authority (resembling closely the problems outlined by Bernstein (1971) arising from the introduction of similar flexibilities into the secondary school curriculum in the 1960s) so that the new structures are not *strong* enough to bear the authoritative delivery of graded assessments. As a student, I may accept '57%' or 'lower second' as *your* verdict upon *my* solution to the problem *you* set in *your* examination paper; but not upon *my* portfolio evidencing what *I* have learned from the last 15 years of *my* life. As a student, I may accept (for now) 'third class' as a verdict, at the end of the course, from a university lecturer whose specialist expertise I am in no position to challenge; but not from my work place mentor, who is basically a colleague rather than a cultural authority, whose limitations in our shared work context are perfectly clear to me, and with whom I must continue to work for the foreseeable future. On the other hand, I will accept a suggestion that in this or that area the adequacy of my work requires further evidence in order to be beyond doubt.

What, then, is the nature of the choice? Is the New Higher Education to be rejected as threatening to undermine the procedures and relationships of a fine educational tradition, inspired by a crude definition of the university as a factory producing marketable skills in order to improve the international competitiveness of the national economy? (See Department of Education, 1990, p. 5; Jessup, 1991, pp 6-7). Again, my answer is: no. The New Higher Education is not merely an attempt to introduce employment values into the academy. Its emphasis upon criterion-referenced assessment and upon the detailed elaboration of required learning outcomes is also part of a serious attempt to embody a number of respectable educational principles: a learner-centred pedagogy, access to educational opportunity for the culturally disadvantaged, precision and justice in

assessment, the encouragement of student autonomy and the integration of theory and practice (Employment Department, 1990, p. 88 ff; Jessup, 1991, pp 305; Winter, 1992). Certainly, the New Higher Education poses a challenge to a number of current higher education practices, but our response must be to distinguish between those current practices whose value requires us to preserve them and those whose shortcomings are such that they are best abandoned. It is my contention that the classified honours degree falls into this latter category.

In criticising the classified honours degrees one certainly risks unpopularity in some quarters, but one finds oneself nevertheless in academically respectable company (see, for example: Oxtoby, 1969, Heywood, 1989; Countryman, 1990). Alison Utley, writing recently in the Times Higher Educational Supplement (THES), quoted a London University professor as saying that the system was "purely arbitrary" (Utley, 1991) and went on to quote no less a figure than the Chair of London University's Academic Council as saying: "the (honours degree) system operates a bit like folklore" (Utley 1991), which prompted no less a figure than the editor of the THES, writing the editorial for the same issue, to go even further: "In fact, degree classifications are a sham" (THES, 3 May 1991).

In the next three sections of the paper, I shall attempt to support such criticisms, not by elaborating them, (since the technical arguments concerning the inevitable lack of reliability and validity are well known) but by arguing that any plausibility that the classified honours degree may appear to possess rests on the ambiguities of its history and on social pressures and conventions, rather than on justified educational principles, and that it can therefore be safely abandoned. The final section presents and justifies a positive alternative, namely the concept of a non-subdivided honours degree.

Historical Glimpses: The Origins of Honours Classification and the Ancient Vocational Tradition

This section is intended to convey two reminders: firstly, that the higher education tradition, although long, is rather ambiguous with respect to the notions of 'pure scholarship' which tend to be invoked in opposition to the recent vocationally oriented initiatives; and secondly, that the classified honours degree, although surrounded by an aura of hallowed tradition, is itself a relatively recent innovation.

Origins of the Honours Classification

No one seems to have written a general history of assessment categories, so the following observations are often rather localised. In the University of Cambridge, at least, the honours degree seems to have been introduced in the eighteenth century as a specific and practical quality assurance strategy to deal with scandalously lax and corrupt procedures for the award of a degree. For example, the rules for the award of a degree at Cambridge in the late sixteenth century required only attendance at lectures, and since this was not enforced, the basic requirement became merely one of residence for a stated period (Winstanley, 1935 p. 43). By the eighteenth century, examinations had become "more of a rite than a test" because the assessment task (disputation in Latin) had become so divorced from the actual capacities of the candidates that "disputation" often "consisted of a parrot-like repetition of a few set sentences" (Winstanley, 1935, p 52). Winstanley described how a Dr Richard Watson, Regius Professor of Divinity, took charge of the situation by dividing candidates into three groups (the top 25%, the middle 50% and the bottom 25%) on the basis of their previous work and examined them separately (p. 51), which prevented "flagrant acts of partiality" on the part of powerful patrons (p. 56) at the cost of largely predetermining the results of the examination (p. 51).

Another process was also at work. In the nineteenth century, degrees with honours were awarded only to a minority of students, the majority (70%) receiving pass degrees (Tillyard, 1913, p. 184). The honours degree emerged as the main category at the expense of the pass degree by the familiar process whereby the relative value of a given qualification gradually declines in the same way as a coinage is gradually devalued and lower denominations are withdrawn (see Dore, 1976). Tillyard quotes the opinion of the Rector of Lincoln College, Oxford, writing in 1866: the pass degree is "a nullity"; "The Honours students are the only students who are undergoing any educational process which it can be considered as a function of a University either to impart or to exact. The present standard of honours must become the qualification for the degree. The BA is superfluous and must be dropped" (Tillyard, 1913, p. 184).

The current structure of honours classifications (first, upper and lower second, third) did not become a consensus arrangement until much more recently. Tillyard, writing in 1913, laments the variety of assessment formats then in use at Cambridge; for example: three classes of honours "qualified by marks of distinction" (mathematics), three classes each with three divisions (classics), a rank ordering of all candidates (law) (Tillyard, 1913, p. 370). This latter format is an interesting example of the tradition of comparing candidates with each other; the 'pass list' was earlier known as the 'Ordo Senioritas' (Winstanley, 1935, p. 49).

The Academic and the Sacred

Since the publication of G.H. Newman's *The Idea of a University* in 1852 (Newman, 1982), university culture has afforded a special value to 'pure' academic study ('Pure research, for example, has a higher status than 'applied' research.), but it is important to remember that universities have an ancient link with *professional* education. The seven "liberal arts" (grammar, rhetoric, logic, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music) were

preliminary studies, undertaken prior to entering one of the three 'faculties': theology, law or medicine (Tillyard, 1913, pp. 2-3). Hence, medieval universities "were inextricably bound up with utilitarian values. They evolved as institutional responses to the pressures to harness educational forces to the professional, ecclesiastical, and governmental requirements of society" (Cobban, 1975, p. 8). So current tensions have a long tradition behind them. Cobban reports the complaints of *thirteenth* century scholars that the study of 'humane letters' in the universities was being overtaken by the study, for pecuniary motives, of law and medicine (Cobban, 1975, p. 18).

However, it was the ecclesiastical profession which was most influential in shaping the early form and meaning of university education, including the awarding of degrees: "Our college language is derived from the church and monastery.... In the writings of the apostolic fathers... great stress is laid on these distinct orders or degrees the gifts of the Holy Spirit, it is said, are sevenfold; and there are seven ranks of ecclesiastical degrees" (Dyer, 1814, pp 258-259). This serves to remind us that the award of a degree was not, originally, a competition or a comparison between candidates, with the emphasis on differentiated outcomes, but an event with a single outcome, namely the initiation of candidates into a new social status with its new set of vocational responsibilities: "Certificates of proficiency were awarded at four stages and were called Degrees or steps, grades, because they marked the point at which a student had arrived" (Tillyard, 1913, p. 3). Tillyard, though he wished to bring order and effectiveness to university assessment, was highly suspicious of competitive examinations, commenting that although competition produced hard-working students, "beneath the brilliant show of College exercises and prizes was concealed a starved and shrivelled understanding" (Tillyard, 1913, p. 102).

In an important respect, the terms 'competition' and 'initiation' sum up the two basic alternative models of selection for privileged status, involving contrasting criteria, procedures, and values. One might indeed suggest that the notorious 'corruption' of the

eighteenth century universities represented the inevitable confusion as to criteria for competence and authority during the shift from a sacred to a secular culture. But this shift is, of course, only relative; contemporary culture is at the very least haunted by a desire to preserve some remnants of the sacred, and this provides an important (if submerged) influence upon debates about higher education.

In order to understand the operation of this influence, it is important to remember that "the medieval university operated as a teacher-training system: a degree meant a permission to begin to teach" (Daly, 1961, p. 122; see also Tillyard, 1913, p. 3). This is a further reminder that the award of a degree represented an initiation into a social role, and also that the activities of the university (like other institutions) included a concern to maintain itself in being, i.e. as a community of teachers and scholars. In other words, the purpose underlying the award of a university degree was 'academic' not in the sense of "knowledge of a discipline as an end in itself" (see Newman, 1982, p. 77) but as a display of the sort of competencies which would be important in the vocational task of teaching that discipline, where teaching is conceived as the transmission of knowledge in the continuation of a sacred cultural tradition.

Furthermore, once it is recognised that the academic life is one particular *professional* role (and one in which higher education institutions have a natural vested interest), the confrontational debate concerning academic and vocational values takes on a different meaning. The claim that academic degrees must select 'the best minds' (leading to charges of 'elitism') becomes understandable as the self-justification of an institution concerned to recruit the best candidates for its own particular purposes. But these particular institutional purposes were, of course, given a general cultural resonance, in medieval times, by the ecclesiastical dimension of the university: knowledge was essentially a mastery of holy texts (Foucault, 1970, p. 34), the transmission of knowledge was a sacred vocation, the community of scholars was a sort of priesthood, the 'ivory tower' a temple. Selection of

'the best minds' (for the job) was an initiation into a status of divinely sanctioned and universal significance.

To sum up, the higher education tradition of assessment does not begin and end with the competitive fourfold honours degree classification system; it must (on the contrary) be seen as a contemporary format which is no more likely to endure than the variety of formats it has replaced. Furthermore, it would appear that the New Higher Education initiatives are not wholly alien to the university tradition of assessment, as soon as we are reminded, by these brief historical glimpses, that the tradition also includes, alongside competition for different grades in demonstrating academic knowledge, a contrary emphasis on awarding a simple 'pass' in recognition of a given stage of proficiency and professional competence. We are also alerted, however, to the possibility that current debates about the nature of higher education will still be haunted by an ancient conflict between the rival status of sacred and practical knowledge.

Classified Honours Degrees and the Idea of Meritocracy

The argument of the previous section was that our sense of the sacrosanct quality of the classified honours degree has its origin in the contingencies of history. The argument to be presented in this section and the next is that our conviction of its justifiability, as an assessment format, continues to rest upon a set of general cultural influences, rather than upon any rigorously argued educational principles.

Let us begin by reminding ourselves of the basic question. How can we explain why it seems perfectly sensible to assess and report the outcomes of educational processes (in every sphere of activity, from classics and geography to nursing and engineering) by summarising the enormous volume and variety of evidence provided by students' work into four simple categories, the outstanding, the above average, the average, and the

(merely) satisfactory? (CNAA, 1989a, Regulations 28, 34). The question is particularly intriguing since it takes but a cursory inquiry to uncover accusations, by writers with respectable academic credentials, that the classified honours degree is unreliable (Klug, 1977, p. 19; Heywood, 1989, pp. 51-55), uninformative (Oxtoby, 1969, p. 77; Klug, 1977, pp. 15-16), secretive (Countryman, 1990), outdated (Oxtoby, 1969, p. 68), and arbitrary (Utley, 1991). How, then, can we explain its continuation? I shall try to provide an explanation by interpreting the classified honours degree as part of a general set of conventional assumptions, whose purpose is to provide a common-sense justification for a particular set of norms, values and social interests. The classified honours degree, in other words, is part of a common-sense orthodoxy; hence its remarkable capacity to survive (so far) the analytical criticisms of educationalists. Let us then examine the implicit assumptions and values embodied in the assessment categories of the classified honours degree.

Classification: Open Competition or the Verdict of Authority?

The essence of the four honours categories is that they create a public comparison among those assessed; students are publicly proclaimed to be better or worse than others. In what way they are better or worse is, in contrast, not publicly proclaimed (in accessible assessment criteria) but is assumed to be generally understood:

"Most assessments in higher education have been conducted by (sic) a tacit acceptance of both strategies [norm-referencing and criterion-referencing]. Examiners have tended to *hold in their minds a personal sense* of the course objectives... and of the overall performance of the relevant set of candidates. *In neither sense, though, are the standards... normally set down on paper.*"

CNAA, 1989b, p. 33 [emphasis added]

But this 'personal sense' of appropriate criteria is assumed to be shared not only by

experienced assessors but also by newly appointed staff, which (again) suggests that the underlying criteria at work are part of a widely diffused set of values and assumptions.

The mysteriousness of the criteria for these acts of comparison is only partially clarified by the fact that they produce assessment outcomes which follow a normal distribution curve: the characteristics of students in the top and the bottom categories are deemed to be relatively rare compared with those in the two middle categories (CNA, 1989a, Regulations 28, 34.). This means, of course, that any institution or member of staff awarding first class honours to the majority of a substantial group of students would not be congratulated on excellent teaching but ridiculed for misunderstanding the nature of the system. Indeed, any increase in the proportion of good degrees tends to lead to a suspicion of falling standards (THES, 1992, 18 September). This problem would not disappear even if detailed descriptions were provided for the meaning of the various honours categories: the essence of the problem lies in using the assumption of a fixed distribution of ability as the basis for assessment decisions.

On the other hand, the normal distribution curve gives only a very rough guide in predicting the assessment outcomes for any given group of students. Heywood quotes a survey of the proportion of first class honours degrees awarded in different subjects which shows a variation from 3% (social studies) to 14% (mathematics) (Heywood, 1989, p. 48), and Klug cites a similar variation between institutions: from Keele University (4.5%) to the University of Kent (17%) Klug, 1977, p. 16). It would seem, therefore, that the form of the competition between students is ambiguous: being among the best in one's own group is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for success; students are not only being compared with each other but also with staff members' implicit conception of an absolute standard, which they have a wide discretion in applying, albeit within the broad limits of the distribution curve.

On another point, however, there is less ambiguity: students are not being assessed in terms of skills or abilities, which might improve with further practice or further learning. On the contrary, the assessment category makes a judgement on qualities of the individual, which are assumed to be intrinsic and fixed. This interpretation follows inescapably from the fact that the degree classification is by definition a final judgement: "No reassessment shall be permitted for a student to improve upon a mark or a grade above the pass level required for the award" (CNAA, 1991, Regulations for the Assessment of Students, p. 97). Students who have once been classified as 'lower second class' may not aspire to become 'upper second class' at some future date. Thus, if a competition is taking place, then it is an opportunity which occurs once only, and its outcome is a categorisation for life. The educational process is an act of self-revelation on the part of the student, followed by the delivery of the assessor's final, authoritative verdict upon the student's overall worthiness: in one important respect, a 'lower second' in art history and a 'lower second' in chemistry proclaim the same general message: 'not a first class mind'. The process may be ambiguous but the upshot is not: a good degree is a lifelong blessing; a poor degree a lifelong stigma.

Higher Education and the Ambiguous Basis for Meritocracy

Honours degree classifications are an example of the 'mental realities' which are an 'internal component' of all social relations, which they thus help to procure, to justify, and to perpetuate (Godelier, 1988, p. 151). Given the features of the classified honours degree noted above, what is the pattern of values and social relations which they seem to justify? The editor of the THES is in no doubt: "It is just another example of the British (English?) class system" (THES, 1991 3 May). The Editorial continues: "We are constantly trying to invent clubs where none need exist, so that we can savour the satisfaction of excluding some of our fellow citizens". But this, although suggestive, is (at best) incomplete: what is the basis on which exclusions are made, and why do they seem (to so many people) to be justifiable? The following sequence of observations attempts to assemble an answer.

- (1) The finality of the categorisation combined with the absence of any public criteria concerning specific skills, knowledge, or abilities indicates that the assessment is intended to select individuals, rather than to indicate what they can do (or have done). Individuals are selected permanently for a certain general position in the social structure, on the basis of their overall intrinsic merit.
- (2) The numerical distribution of the categories, whereby a minority of students are selected as 'outstanding' or 'above average', suggests that the social structure which the assessment process anticipates and promotes is conceptualised as a hierarchy of status positions.
- (3) Classification of honours serves to justify a social hierarchy as 'meritocratic' by making the basis of selection appear to be (at one level) a competition in which success goes to those with the most merit.
- (4) But the exact nature of this merit (the abilities it summarises) and exactly who possess it remain matters for the discretion of higher education staff; published criteria are not precise enough to give students a basis for disputing decisions or for careful preparation that might guarantee success.
- (5) Hence, ambiguity is carefully maintained as to whether the crucial abilities can be learned or whether they represent an innate and thus fundamentally mysterious 'talent'.
- (6) This ambiguity serves to justify the extent to which differential educational success in a supposedly meritocratic society nevertheless continues to reproduce differences in inherited advantage.
- (7) In this way, higher education institutions manage a crucial dilemma in the way they conceive of their social functions and responsibilities. On the one hand, they are

committed to facilitating a democratic openness of access to positions of high social status, by fostering the widest possible opportunity to *compete* for educational achievement. On the other hand, they continue to be influenced by the assumptions underlying an *aristocratic* social order (government by 'the best' people [*aristos*], where the nature of merit may be left undefined since it may not legitimately be challenged). This was, of course, the social order under which the university tradition arose, a social order which is not 'open' but 'closed', because the differential distribution of merit is not the outcome of educational achievement but of divine dispensation, a matter of 'birth'. From this point of view, ability is not an acquisition, but a 'gift'.

(8) The earlier argument concerning the operation of the ecclesiastical tradition in higher education thus remains of continuing significance. The award of an honours classification is (implicitly) both the outcome of a student's personal effort (indicating the contingent result of a competition) and an authoritative (priestly) judgement (indicating a particular 'degree' of grace).

(9) What otherwise seem to be contradictory and even bizarre features of the classified honours degree can thus be explained as a double justification of educational outcomes, invoking both competitive and authoritarian forms of legitimacy. The ambiguity underlying this structure of justification corresponds to the ambiguous basis of moral order and cognitive authority in a society which would still wish to equate the differentiation of social status on the basis of secular struggle (the market economy, competitive occupational careers) with the operation of divine justice.

(10) A crucial factor in managing this ambiguity is the large discretion of the academic examiner, whose pronouncements upon the differential value of individuals not only have the simplicity of the results of a competition ('first', 'second', 'third') but also preserve the secrecy, mystery and unpredictability of oracular judgements made upon sacred matters.

We can see, therefore, why the ritual surrounding the award of a degree continues to invoke the ecclesiastical tradition of the medieval university. The right of academic assessment procedures to invoke implicit criteria, which seem like absolute standards if only because they are nowhere laid down and hence open to scrutiny, represents a widespread subconscious scepticism concerning the rational basis for a secular meritocratic society, motivated perhaps by nostalgia for a divinely ordained ('aristocratic') social order.

Grading: The Educator's Prerogative as an Everyday Routine

The previous section offered a general cultural interpretation of the crucial role played in the classification of honours degrees by the judgmental discretion of examiners. But this interpretation does not really explain (a) why inexperienced members of staff are expected to carry out this function without training, nor (b) why it seems so widely acceptable, in spite of the obvious and widely noted dangers of arbitrariness and injustice. These are the questions which will be taken up in this section.

The classified honours degree is an example of a widespread assessment format, 'grading', in which candidates are compared with each other in order to produce a rank order, either of individuals or of groups. The argument of this section is that grading is not a specialised technique exclusive to professional educators as part of a technical repertoire of skills, but a common-sense activity which is widely used as an everyday routine by the population as a whole. Grading (in this sense of norm-referenced, comparative assessment) is acceptable because it is familiar, and the same is true of the academic examiner's discretion in invoking implicit, taken-for-granted criteria: both are acceptable by virtue of seeming to be 'common sense' and thus natural and inevitable.

Grading as Gossip

One piece of evidence that grading is a widely practised and widely understood activity is

contained in the weekly listings of televised films (in *Radio Times*, *Time Out*, etc.) where each film is given a number of ticks or stars to indicate how highly it is recommended. The pattern is predictable: a very few films are given the highest and the lowest rating, a second category contains a substantial minority, while most are classified in the middle as 'moderately recommended'. The parallel with honours degree classifications is exact. (A similar pattern emerges (for example) from the AA (Automobile Association) ratings of the hotels of European capital cities.)

Expanding our search for analogies with academic grading to include any situation where judges are called upon to assess competitors, we find a vast range of sporting and entertainment events, from skating and gymnastics, television quizzes and talent shows. Each of these activities requires a judge because the activity itself (like educational assessment) does not fit naturally into a competitive format; the criteria are too complex, so the competition has to be artificially arranged. To this extent they are even more interesting (as cultural phenomena) than the genuinely competitive sports which they attempt to imitate: football, darts, golf, athletics, etc. The latter, it would seem, provide the pattern to which other cultural forms aspire, namely a status hierarchy legitimated through competition, winners and losers, the outstanding and the also-rans. Irrespective of how the outcome is decided (indirectly, by an act of judgement, or directly, by a score of points, goals, etc. or measurement of time or distance), its significance is relentlessly analysed for the benefit of the public by specialist commentators, whose role is to note the fine distinctions between performances which explain the results. Such commentaries provide a model and a cue for general participation in the entertaining pastime of comparing the rival merits of performers: in pubs, school yards, or dining rooms, we all join in on the comparative assessment of cricketers, rap singers, or string quartets. Grading, then, is not the prerogative of professionals (gymnastics commentators, music critics or university academics) but fun for us all, a form of gossip.

Grading as a Pleasure

Why do we enjoy it? At one level, the elaboration of a comparative assessment is merely a continuation of those expressions of preference which are among the early conversational initiatives of the toddler ('This is my best teddy'). This serves as a reminder that one of the important side effects of comparative assessment is self-enhancement, a pleasurable way of reinforcing our sense of personal control in a generally recalcitrant world. In comparing the rival merits of eminent footballers or opera singers, we are making an implicitly self-aggrandising claim to understand fully the subtle criteria underpinning a highly complex and esoteric activity.

Similarly, in comparing degree candidates in order to award first or second class honours, we are pleasurable reminded of the outstanding qualities of our own intellects which are logically entailed by our apparent ability to do so. (Hence, perhaps, the excess detail of some of our contributions to Assessment Board proceedings.) This oblique pleasure to be derived from making comparative judgements was nicely illustrated by Bernard Levin, who while choosing his records on the radio programme 'Desert Island Discs' (30 October 1987) introduced a Schubert song as follows: "Schubert knew better than anyone, better even than Mozart, or, at least, as well as Mozart, that (as I once put it): nothing bad matters, and everything good does". Clearly, the act of comparing Mozart and Schubert generated for Levin a momentary sense that he was 'above' them.

Grading as Prediction

The official justification for grading performances is not, of course, that it is entertaining, but that it is a rational basis for predicting future performances in a different role, i.e. for selection processes such as recruitment, promotion, etc. But this is to assume that different roles require the same abilities, which is not, on the face of it, very plausible. For example, it hardly seems appropriate simply to offer a job in a bank to the candidate with the best class of honours in their economics degree, and there is indeed little evidence to suggest

that this is how graduate recruitment occurs (Oxtoby, 1969, p. 73; Klug, 1977m p. 20; Heywood, 1989, p.42). Neither does it seem sensible to offer a job as, say, a social work manager to the social worker with the highest level of skill as a practitioner. The irrationality of this approach to selection is neatly encapsulated in the well-known Peter Principle and its Corollary: "In a hierarchy, every employee tends to rise to his (sic) level of incompetence; in time every post tends to be occupied by an employee who is incompetent to carry out its duties" (Lawrence J. Peter, quoted in Faber, 1980, p. 26).

The Peter Principle is not inescapable. There is likely to be an overlap between the abilities required to carry out one role successfully and those required for success in another. Significant evidence could be collected from past performances to indicate potential for a future role. But this would necessitate an analysis of the various abilities required in both roles, in order to make the judgement. This, of course, is precisely what the grading of performance does not do. It directs attention to the question, "Which candidate has performed best in role A?", thereby leaving implicit the nature of the abilities involved and hence their relevance or otherwise for role B. Instead, the question should be: "What abilities do these two roles require; and has this candidate demonstrated abilities in role A which are important for role B?" This line of argument is relevant both for promotions within employment and for articulating the relationship between higher education and employment, placing an appropriate onus upon academic institutions to provide a detailed profile of graduates' competencies (see, for example, Assiter & Fenwick, 1992) and upon employers to analyse carefully the precise competencies required by available employment opportunities.

Precision through Numbers?

One problem of articulating fine distinctions between very complex phenomena (examination scripts, for example) is the imprecision of language. Hence the widespread use of percentage marks as a way of ensuring that assessments can be compared with each

other. This provides an apparently objective and precise basis for the act of comparison by abstracting it from any actual criteria, which are indeed never fully articulated but are a 'personal sense' held in examiners' minds (CNAA, 1989b, p. 33). Nevertheless, although percentage marks are in common use, CNAA warns: "Assessment is a matter of judgement, not simply of computation. Marks, grades, and percentages are not absolute values, but symbols used by examiners to communicate their judgement" (CNAA, 1991, p. 91). But CNAA is wrong about this: the function of numbers is indeed to imply the notion of a precise and absolute standard, which is why historians, for example, never give 100% but mathematicians do, and why it has been suggested that to award 100% for a philosophy essay (other than one written by God) would be a logical absurdity (Klug, 1977, p. 19).

This use of numerical forms to give an air of 'scientific' precision to complex judgements based on non-explicit criteria is also a widespread everyday activity, partly because of the general dominance of cultural styles derived from science and technology, and also because the whole population has spent formative years receiving and pondering 'marks' given by school teachers. Thus, if requested we are all capable of giving a numerical assessment (jocularly, perhaps, but nonetheless carefully) to a picturesque scene, a piece of confectionery, a fortnight's holiday in Greece, even (regrettably indeed) the attractiveness of a member of the opposite sex (see Braine, 1959, pp. 36-38) and so on. Thus, when three political journalists were asked on the radio (Radio 4, 6 October 1990) to give their assessment of the effectiveness of Margaret Thatcher's closing speech to the Conservative party conference, one said, after a pause, 'six out of ten'. The others agreed. No further clarification was felt to be necessary.

Grading, then, can be readily explained as the continuation of a common-sense cultural routine into professional discourse and professional practice. It is therefore not surprising that staff in higher education do it, can do it, find it quite natural to do it, and wish to continue to do it. But this does not mean that it is grounded in defensible educational

principles which could refute the arguments in favour of pass/fail assessments relating to specified learning outcomes advocated by proponents of the New Higher Education initiatives, to which we now turn.

Proposals for a Rational Higher Education Assessment Format

As access to higher education is widened, we shall find that we need to cater for students who, compared with 18-year-old ex-A level full-timers, are more experienced, more independent, more mobile, more demanding and more discerning. They will approach universities not as neophytes but as sceptical consumers, having probably had experience of criterion-referenced assessment at school or at work; and on considering the assessment process which will structure their higher education careers, they are quite likely to be struck by the questionable nature of some of its assumptions and practices. We need, therefore, as a matter of some urgency, to make our procedures defensible on rational educational grounds to students who will consider themselves well able to articulate their own interests and educational requirements.

My general argument has been that the procedures and assumptions surrounding the classified honours degree are only comprehensible in terms of its historical and cultural context, rather than being justifiable on educational grounds. This in turn suggests that although many colleagues will find arguments to defend it, in spite of its faults, such arguments will not seem convincing to students who will perceive that the current arrangements do not serve their interests and who will be increasingly aware of alternatives.

Fortunately many of these alternative procedures have already been worked out, under the impetus of the New Higher Education initiatives already referred to: the inclusion of learning derived from experience outside university, the involvement of non-university

staff in the assessment process, criterion-referenced assessment based on specified competencies, an emphasis on assessment outcomes on either 'pass' or 'insufficient evidence as yet', learning contracts, profiling, self-assessment, degree courses constructed through students' own permutations of modules, and so on (see Employment Department, 1990; Duckenfield & Stirner, 1992). What is necessary in order to incorporate these ideas securely within the basic assessment structure of the university system is the introduction of the non-subdivided honours degree as the central award. This proposal is elaborated and explained below, not as a blueprint (many procedural details would need to be worked out) but as a general concept.

- (1) The non-subdivided honours degree would be an honours degree at the same standard as the current classified honours degree, awarded on a pass/fail basis, like every other award in the higher education system, from the Certificate of Higher Education to the PhD.
- (2) If assessment is on a pass/fail basis, it can be focused on whether or not a student has demonstrated specified learning outcomes (or course objectives or 'competencies': such terminological differences are in the end of minor significance) without reference to the *proportion* of candidates achieving different 'standards'.
- (3) When course requirements are presented as learning outcomes and are assessed on a pass/fail basis, it becomes relatively straightforward to incorporate into degree programmes the wide variety of evidence of students' learning, e.g. portfolios of individualised documentation (Evans, 1981, p. 76 ff.), and the wide variety of students' learning experiences, e.g. prior experiential learning (Evans, 1988) learning from employment or work placements (Duckenfield & Stirner, 1992), all of which currently pose enormous difficulties of 'quality control' when attempts are made to grade them for differential honours.

(4) Methods for describing non-vocational degree-level courses in terms of learning outcomes have been described in general terms (UDACE, 1990; Otter, 1992). Methods for describing vocational degrees in terms of outcomes, together with an epistemological rationale and methods for managing the pedagogical and assessment processes entailed, have been elaborated in considerable procedural detail in the work of the ASSET Programme at Anglia Polytechnic University (see Maisch & Winter, 1991; 1992a; 1992b). Both the UDACE and the ASSET projects demonstrate that the categories describing the learning outcomes of degree level work can be as sophisticated as the processes, understandings and abilities involved, and need not be simplistic, behaviourist, or mechanical (Winter, 1992).

(5) Where assessments are made on a pass/fail basis in relation to specified outcomes, irrespective of assumptions concerning the normative distribution of ability, improvements in assessment results will not carry a suspicion of falling standards; instead, it will be possible to raise standards, by changing the specification of the required outcomes.

(6) When course requirements are presented as learning outcomes and are assessed on a pass-fail basis, support for candidates experiencing difficulty need not be inhibited by fears of being unfair to other candidates receiving less support, since assessments do not compare candidates with each other, but with the task at issue. The period of formative assessment (operating with the categories 'pass'/'insufficient evidence as yet') which precedes the final assessment point (pass/fail) will be limited by the period of maximum registration. In this way, the consequences of unduly harsh assessment (never entirely preventable) are minimised: instead of simply receiving an assessment which is unjust but final (as at present), the candidate is required ("unnecessarily") to prolong her/his learning process, which may have positive as well as negative effects.

- (7) Pass/fail assessments in relation to specified learning outcomes are likely to be more rigorous than the current classification system, since there is no 'borderline', or 'weak' category which enables the examiner to avoid the trauma of failure yet at the same time, to salve her/his professional conscience.
- (8) The specification of learning outcomes also means that the coverage of assessment procedures can be genuinely comprehensive, rather than sampling a small proportion of course content, as at present, resulting in the dangerous game of 'question-spotting' and (consequently) an unspecifiable but inevitable gap between the apparently comprehensive significance of the qualification and the actual competencies of any given graduate.
- (9) The public specification of required learning outcomes as the basic course documentation will enable degree certificates to include a 'profile' of various skills, abilities and knowledge, which have been demonstrated (Assiter & Fenwick, 1992). This will mean that degree certificates can be practically informative from the point of view of potential employers, by describing what it is that the holder of the certificate is able to do. This in turn will encourage employers to analyse more precisely the competencies which will be required of newly recruited staff.
- (10) In short, the specification of learning outcomes allows the introduction of a measure of accountability into higher education, in a form which is valid from an educational, as opposed to a purely managerial, point of view. But if we are to accept responsibility for the outcomes of our educational processes, it is important that our claims are realistic. The classified honours degree makes a claim to grade inherent qualities of mind, a claim whose grandiloquence is defended only by its vagueness, which prevents its inevitable injustices being open to challenge. A non-subdivided honours degree coupled with a profile of achieved learning outcomes, in contrast, could be the basis for a claim which is both more modest and more open to justification: to describe the competencies that a given student has demonstrated.

Conclusion

Clearly, a transformation of the assessment process from comparisons based on implicit criteria to descriptions related to explicit criteria will involve higher education staff in considerable work. However, the nature of the task and the procedures required have been clarified to some extent by the published work cited above, and the task itself is not only a worthwhile intellectual challenge but an opportunity for substantial educational reform.

The classified honours degree, and the grading process which underpins it, is an interesting historical growth whose roots stretch deep into the past and whose branches ramify widely into our current culture; but on educational grounds it is indefensible. Its main beneficiaries are academic staff, whom it protects by allowing the concealment of assessment criteria and by generating extrinsic motivation for learning in the form of a competition between candidates; a competition, however, whose processes have, from the student's point of view, a Kafka-like ambiguity and whose outcomes (therefore) an equally Kafka-like unpredictability.

In contrast, an assessment format based on a pass/fail response to specified learning outcomes would (a) empower students, by giving them the information they need in order to plan their own learning, the crucial importance of which is strongly argued in Heron (1988); (b) help employers by giving them the information they need in order to make rational recruitment decisions; and (c) remove the administrative conundrums otherwise posed by attempts to include the full variety of students' learning experiences in higher education curricula. In other words, the introduction of a non-subdivided honours degree would help higher education institutions become more informative, more equitable, more open, more individualised, more flexible, and more student-centred, which may indeed be a condition for their survival.

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"GRADUATE EMPLOYMENT AND DEGREE CLASS"

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ABSTRACT. *This article examines how polytechnic and college graduates' degree class is linked to their patterns of entry to further study and success in finding a first job. It also sets out trends in the distribution of degree classes during the 1980s and discusses possible reasons for the rapid increase in the proportion of firsts and upper seconds.*

A previous *Employment Gazette* article (J Tarsh: "New graduate destinations and degree class", July 1988) established that, for university graduates, there was a clear link between their degree class and their first destination after graduation. Degree class influenced likelihood of entering particular types of further study and training. Lower degree class also meant a higher risk of unemployment. These results were derived after allowing for new graduates' sex and degree subject so that degree class seemed to have an independent effect on destinations.

The usual interpretation of degree class is that it is a measure of ability. This is why it is of interest and indeed it is one of the few available such measures that is generated by the process of education. (The main other example being grades at A-level and GCSE). It is a controversial measure perhaps and ability is a loose term, covering both intellect, and personal qualities such as persistence and perception and personal and social skills. A particular degree class might be compatible with a range of combinations of these attributes. Furthermore to the extent that employers rank and choose their graduate applicants by ability they might use quite different mixes of intellect, qualities and skills which only partially overlap with the distribution of degree classes.

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Employers' Use of Degree Class: Survey Evidence

The previous article referred to an apparent paradox in the interpretation of its results. Discussions with graduate careers advisers suggested that most recruiters of new graduates do not give much weight to degree class. The main exceptions were scientific research (and other technical work) and some high paying 'city' employers such as merchant banks. (The latter sometimes supposed to be indulging in conspicuous consumption of the best qualified rather than necessarily needing very high ability in their recruits!)

The article suggested that there were two main ways of reconciling this apparent employer indifference to degree class with the evidence of the first destinations survey. First, it might be that employers used degree class as a first sift to winnow down large numbers of applications even if it did not thereafter carry much weight. A second explanation was that employers were primarily seeking personal qualities and skills but these were correlated with degree class. Graduates with better class degrees tended to be recruited even though their degree class played no explicit role in the process. However, it seemed unlikely that employers would remain unaware of this effect and it might be expected that in time it would become an overt part of the selection process. Certainly the impression is that general recruitment practice is moving to the use of objective tests of likely capability in the job and potential in the organisation. The puzzle remains.

There is survey evidence of employers' use of degree class in new graduate selection. In 1981 A. Gordon asked a sample of 58 graduate recruiters whether they had any preferences about the class of degree of their recruits. Their replies were as follows:

(See next page)

Table 1 Employers' preferences over class of degree

	Per cent
No preference	23
First class	9
First or upper second	49
Lower second or above	19
base = 53	100

Note: five employers did not reply. the overall survey response rate was 58 per cent. Of the 23 per cent some 12 per cent had no preference even between honours or ordinary degrees while the other 1 per cent did prefer honours.

Source: Attitudes of employers to the recruitment of graduates " by Alan Gordon, *Educational Studies* vol. 9 no. 1 1983.

In general, employers did have preferences and these were in the expected direction. The design of the question allowed employers to express a positive preference for graduates with lower seconds or thirds - to repudiate, as it were, high degree class - but none did so. These results suggest that, contrary to what has been said earlier, employers had strong views on degree class, with nearly 60 per cent preferring at least an upper second. The employer sample was very small although it included a number of major recruiters.

Of more significance perhaps is the timing of the survey. New graduate unemployment rose sharply in 1980 and would rise again in 1981 and 1982 to reach an all-time high. This came after a decade when the output of new graduates had increased fast but economic growth had stagnated. The consequence for graduates was falling relative pay and increasing difficulty in finding work. Market forces therefore allowed employers to be selective. In times of stronger demand for labour, it would be predicted that employers would relax hiring standards such as minimum degree class and the results of the Gordon study might well not hold.

Much more recent and apparently contrasting evidence on this issue comes from the

employer survey undertaken in 1989 as part of the inter-departmental review of demand for graduates, whose report was published in March 1990. A sample of some 450 employers who recruited new graduates in 1988 were asked whether they specified a minimum class of degree for their new graduate intake. The survey was not therefore directly comparable with Gordon since that asked about preferences. Results are shown below in table 2.

Table 2 Percentage of employers specifying a minimum class of degree for their recruits, by job function, 1988

(Base: Private sector recruiters with 20 or more employees)

Job function	Per Cent
Finance accountancy	19
Computing and related	14
Specialist professions	13
Production and Engineering	10
R and D	9
Sales and Marketing	6
General Management	6

Source: *Highly Qualified People: Supply and Demand*,

HMSO, London March 1990

Only a small proportion of employers stipulated a minimum class of degree and the low percentages for specialist professions and R and D are particularly notable and indeed surprising. The low ranking of such typically generalist work as management (trainee) and sales/marketing might have been expected even if the absolute size of the percentages would not have been predicted. Employers who said they had difficulties in recruiting all the graduates they needed were asked whether they would lower the class of degree they were willing to accept. Not surprisingly, given the general apparent indifference to degree class, very few said they would do this.

It is difficult to interpret the apparent contrast between these results and those of Gordon's

study because the two surveys asked different questions. It could be that employers took the 1989 survey question strictly at face value. They could have been saying that they did not use low degree class as an absolute bar to recruitment or else that they had no explicit policy on degree class. Their preferences and practice might have been different. Alternatively, while the respondents to the Gordon survey had clear preferences about degree class this still might have been a small influence on their recruitment. Only if other and more important factors were equal would degree class influence employee selection. Even so, the 1989 survey finding is striking in that 90 per cent of those recruiting for R and D would, in principle, seemingly accept a graduate with a third.

Another indicator of employers' valuation of degree class is whether they pay a higher starting salary to graduates with a good class of degree. The limitation with this evidence is that there might be some employers who preferred graduates with good class degrees but who used high average starting pay rather than specific premia to achieve this. The extra reward for higher degree class would then be obscured.

The only sources on salary offers and degree class are two recent surveys of starting pay and recruitment among samples of graduate employers. A survey of members of the Association of Graduate Recruiters at the end of 1989 found that just some 12 per cent of the 335 respondents said they paid extra for a good degree class. The survey report gave no information on the size of the bonus or whether it applied just to first or to upper seconds, as well. (This survey was conducted by the Institute of Manpower Studies). A second smaller survey of 130 employers, also in autumn 1989 found that 9 per cent paid a bonus for first class honours with a range for £250 to £1,750 and a median value of £500.
(Source: PA Consulting Group report)

Interpretation

The picture that emerges from the surveys is confused. Yet, as the analysis of the first destinations statistics later in this article will show, there is a clear initial employment advantage to graduates in having a good class of degree. If nevertheless employer indifference to degree class is the rule (albeit with some exceptions for particular occupations and degree subjects) then it is interesting to consider why this might be. For certainly higher education institutions seem to treat the determination of degree class with due seriousness. It has been reported by graduate careers advisers that, as the labour market for new graduates had improved over the past few years, graduates have been postponing job seeking in order to attend to their studies, and gain a good class degree. Yet quite possibly they need not have bothered.

One reason for lack of employer interest in degree class is the almost mechanical point that much graduate recruitment occurs on the 'milk round' and therefore before graduates have even taken their finals. Indeed, the scale of recruitment before finals could be seen as evidence that degree class does not count for much with employers. However, job offers could be made conditional on achieving a particular class of degree. Recruiters can ask academic referees to predict students' degree class. They can also ask them to assess the students' performance in the first and second years of their courses. This in turn might prove to be a good predictor of degree class and hence explain the first destinations evidence.

The author has consulted a number of graduate careers advisers on this point and on the topic more generally. They thought that the practice of individual employers varied greatly and it was difficult to generalise. It was quite usual to ask for a prediction of degree class at second interview stage or when taking up references, and job offers were sometimes conditional on the student attaining a minimum class. However, such conditions were

rarely enforced if the potential recruit did not get the required degree class. In effect employers gave the greatest weight to the candidates' performance in their selection procedures and degree class was very secondary to this. Interestingly it was suggested that those who applied for jobs after finals, once their results were known, might well find that their class of degree received much closer scrutiny from employers and was used as a selection device. Indeed, this meant that students who did not expect good exam results could well improve their employment prospects by applying for jobs before finals!

A second influence on employers is that they might consider that degree class either did not measure the abilities they were seeking or else was too unreliable. The careers advisers referred to above said that most employers gave significant weight to students' O - and A level grades (leading one adviser to comment that many graduate employers were thereby, in effect, recruiting 21 year old school leavers). The reasons for this are unclear. It could be simply that school grades are seen as more standardised measures of definite information on ability. They might also have the advantage of covering a wide range of subjects and, in some sense, being seen as more testing or revealing than a single subject degree.

Where employers use elaborate selection methods for graduates, such as a series of interviews and psychological tests, this might suggest that they are seeking to discriminate quite closely between applicants. It might be that, for such employers, neither the students' educational experience nor information on student quality provided by the educational system is sufficient for this.

Finally, employer attitudes to degree class can be linked to the debate about transferable skills in higher education. The evidence is that many employers recruit new graduates regardless of the subject content of their degree. Graduates' personal skills and qualities are much more important. The argument then is that the study of any degree subject

provides such transferable skills which employers value. Furthermore this is claimed even though the course design is quite oblivious of such factors and is determined purely by the academic imperatives of the subject. (It is however also argued that course design can be adapted with the explicit intention of teaching these skills). It is not at all clear what this model would predict about the value of degree class since the mechanisms by which degrees might produce transferable skills are yet to be researched.

The evidence that many employers recruit graduates regardless of their degree subject can be given a very contrasting explanation to that of a demand for transferable skills. It might be that such employers see much of higher education as a convenient source of generally bright and hard-working 21 year olds with potential. The content of their higher education, including their performance in exams, is incidental because the demands of work are so different from those of education and the future performance of new young recruits is too uncertain anyway. Instead employers rely on selection methods that are very specific to their business such as psychological and intellectual tests and interviews. Or else they use periods of trainee-ship or probation with which to assess the recruit's performance in the organisation. A degree might simply certify a threshold level of ability and possession of desirable personal qualities.

On this view it is not at all clear how far higher education is essential to produce the non-educational outcomes employers seek. Gordon noted that: "A number of respondents felt that excessive attention had been paid in the questionnaire to the educational attainments of graduates and insufficient stress laid on the fact that companies were recruiting individuals." To illustrate this, he quoted the following comments from employers in the study:

'Education is not as relevant as personal suitability'.

'You appear to have missed the main reason why employers hire graduates, that is to manage people and things. For this intelligence, commonness and leadership ability are the most important requirements. However, most of all we look for engines, and not carriages, that is the ability to make things happen.'

'We set out to employ people not degrees as such.'

'Where the degree study is irrelevant to the job or career - and many degree courses are an indulgence rather than a conscious attempt to commence a career - then the employer will consider a graduate on individual merit.'

First Destinations by Degree Class: Polytechnics and Colleges

Table 3 summarises the first destinations by degree class of new first degree graduates in 1988 for a selection of degree subjects. The table uses an abbreviated form of the presentation in the previous article and just shows the proportions of graduates entering further academic study and who were unemployed or in short term UK employment. The polytechnic figures have been split by sex but, for the colleges, their smaller number of graduates has meant that it is better to combine results for men and women in order to increase the sample size. The small numbers of graduates with firsts and thirds in some subjects has meant that these too have had to be omitted and in these cases, unfortunately, it has not been possible to show the variation of destinations across the full range of degree classes. Table 4 gives a comparison of universities, polytechnics and colleges for the all subject totals.

(See next pages)

Table 3 New graduate destinations by degree class 1988

	Per Cent*									
	Further academic study					Unemployment/ short-term employment				
	1	2.1	2.2	3	Ordinary	1	2.1	2.2	3	Ordinary
POLYTECHNIC										
Men										
Engineering:										
Civil	6	4	3	9	4	0	0	2	7	7
Electrical	14	7	2	11	6	0	5	14	23	23
Mechanical	12	9	6	5	7	2	4	8	21	19
General	8	6	3	15	4	0	5	9	35	14
Maths/computing	8	7	4	2	2	4	5	12	18	22
Biological science	31	11		0		23	35			
Physics	36	14		0		10	19			48
Chemistry	62	36	19	4	3		12	11	13	24
Miscellaneous science	26	33	5		4		23	27		27
Combined science	50	15	12	4	6	17	24	26	41	41
Business studies	0	1	2	0		12	9	17		6
Economics	13	7	3			24	28	33		
Accountancy		3	0	0			1	8		0
Geography	19	6					27	38		
Psychology	19	9					77	51		
Sociology	11	6					31	38		
Other social studies		11	5					28	32	
Government	13	10					34	25		
History	9	5					24	36		
Arts general	16	3	0			39	45	38		
Education	6	1	2	0	14	0	1	4	11	8
Fin art	14	4				23	31			
Design	25	8	5	1		2	11	14	22	
All subjects	22	10	5	4	4	6	13	18	21	16
Women										
Engineering	3	2		2		5	8		7	
Maths/computing		6	4	0	3		10	16	13	17
Chemistry	22	12				9	23			
Combined science	32	16	7	0	5		21	27	25	31
Business studies	5	1		0		5	11	15	16	
Economics	7	7				15	24			
Accountancy		0	2				6	11		
Sociology	35	5	5	3			21	33	39	

Table 3 (contd.) New graduate destinations by degree class 1988

Per Cent*

	Further academic study					Unemployment/ short-term employment				
	1	2.1	2.2	3	Ordinary	1	2.1	2.2	3	Ordinary
English	7	3				26	30			
Other language studies	5	4		3		13	26			27
Arts general		9	2	3			30	36	32	
Education	0	1	0	0	23	3	5	7	8	3
Fine art	21	12	3			27	23			
Design	20	11	3	1		5	10	19	27	
All subjects	17	7	3	1	8	8	15	20	25	14
COLLEGE										
Men and women										
Miscellaneous science	25	6				22	41			
Combined science	15	5	0	0		16	22	28		9
Business studies	2	1				10	16			
Sociology		18	3				35	39		
English		12	3				22	29		
History		8	0				15	23		
Arts general	41	11	5	4	2		25	23	39	
Education	1	0	0	0	1	2	4	7	13	10
Fine art	24	6	0	0	23	12	25	13	29	
Design	18	13	5	5	3	8	9	13	21	17
Drama		12	2	0	0		23	30	30	36
All subjects excluding education	31	13	4	3	2	17	17	23	23	26

Blank indicates sample too small for analysis

*Graduates entering further academic study are shown as a percentage of all graduates of known destination less those not available for employment and overseas graduates returning home.
 Graduates who were unemployed or in short term UK work are shown as a percentage of graduates entering the labour force as employed or unemployed.

(Table 4 is presented on the next page)

Table 4. First destinations by degree class: all subject averages by sector of higher education 1988

		Per Cent			
Sex, HE Sector	Further study	Teacher training	Unemployment	Unemployment/ Short-term employment	
Men					
1 U	36	1	4	6	
P	22	1	3	6	
C	36	7	7	15	
2.1 U	19	2	7	11	
P	10	2	8	13	
C	16	9	12	18	
2.2 U	8	3	10	16	
P	5	2	11	18	
C	6	7	14	25	
3 U	4	3	16	22	
P	3	3	12	21	
C	3	9	12	20	
All U	14	2	8	12	
P	8	2	9	16	
C	10	8	14	22	
Women					
1 U	31	4	4	7	
P	17	4	3	8	
C	26	4	9	20	
2.1 U	13	7	7	13	
P	7	5	7	15	
C	11	12	7	16	
2.2 U	5	9	9	18	
P	3	5	10	21	
C	3	12	10	21	
3 U	4	9	14	21	
P	1	4	16	25	
C	3	9	11	24	
All U	9	7	7	13	
P	5	5	8	17	
C	7	11	10	20	

Key. U University P Polytechnic C College (excluding teacher training)

Note: The further study and teacher training percentages are based on total graduates of known destination less overseas returning home and not available. The unemployment and short-term percentages are on a labour force base.

Results

The previous analysis of the first destinations in 1986 of university graduates by degree class and subject pointed to four main results. Higher degree class was associated with:

- higher likelihood of entering further academic study
- lower likelihood of entering teacher training. This was most marked in science and for men and least so for arts and languages and for women.
- lower likelihood of entering the labour force and, for those who did enter,
- lower risk of unemployment or short-term work.

The figures in table 3 support the link between degree class and further study and with entry to the labour force. There was no apparent link between class and entry to teacher training although the percentages of graduates doing this were really too small for there to be much of a pattern to detect.

Unemployment and short-term UK employment

The previous analysis, using 1986 university figures, showed that graduates' risk of being unemployed or in short-term work steadily increased with lower degree class. Table 5 reproduces those figures together with equivalent results from table 4. Unfortunately sample size means that it is possible only to compare upper and lower seconds by individual subject.

Unemployment and short-term UK employment

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Table 6 can only be illustrative because it is based on an ad hoc selection of subjects and in effect summarises the information on unemployment by degree class in table 3. Given this, it appears that the unemployment differential between upper and lower second observed for universities also holds for polytechnics and colleges. Furthermore the size of the differential was much the same in each of the sectors and for men and women at around 5 percentage points.

The upper and lower second unemployment differential varied markedly between subjects but not in any apparently systematic way. There was also no apparent link between the differential and the average unemployment in each subject nor did the differential vary by subject group, for example higher in engineering or science.

(Table 5 is presented on the next page)

Table 5 Average unemployment and unemployment/short-term rates by degree class

		Unemployment/short-term				Per Cent	
						Unemployment	
		1	2.2	2.2	3	2.1	2.2
Universities							
1986	Men	3	10	15	22	na	na
	Women	2	8	12	20	na	na
Polytechnics							
1988	Men	na	16	22	na	9	13
	Women	na	17	22	na	7	10
Colleges							
1988	Men/women	na	16	21	na	9	13

Note: The figures in the table are the simple unweighted averages based on a selection of subjects from table 3. For the polytechnics the selection was 18 subjects with a base of 100 or more graduates (but excluding law). For women, a base of 50 was used giving 13 subjects. Psychology and fine art were excluded from the employment comparisons. For the colleges, the averages were based on 14 subjects (including those in table 3).

All Subject Averages and Sectoral Comparisons

Table 4 shows how, for the all subject totals, the three sectors of higher education compared in their pattern of first destinations by degree class in 1988. Unfortunately, although such comparisons are naturally of interest they can be deceptive and it is not possible to deduce any definite direct sector effect. This is because the subject balance varies by sector and by degree class and this significantly affects destinations. Subject balance also accounts for the apparent breaks in trend or unexpected results in various of the figures. For example, polytechnic ordinary degree holders had lower unemployment/ short-term rates than those with lower seconds or thirds. This was because, for men and women, there was a preponderance of Engineering and Education graduates in the total or ordinary degrees, and these subjects have below average unemployment. (Some 70 per cent of men ordinary graduates had degrees in engineering or education as against 30 per cent for all men). Similarly, men college graduates

with thirds had an unemployment/short-term rate lower than for those with lower seconds and on a par with that for upper seconds. This seems to because the third class group contained fewer graduates in arts and more in business related social studies.

College graduates with firsts also had surprisingly high unemployment/short-term rates. Here the main reason was the great preponderance among firsts of graduates in creative arts. These subjects accounted for 69 per cent of men and 50 per cent of women college graduates with firsts. Fine art alone made up 36 per cent of men and 23 per cent of women with firsts and, as table 3 showed, the unemployment/short-term rate for this subject was anomalously high. This in turn reflected a surprisingly high proportion of graduates in short-term employment.

College first class graduate unemployment was also high relative to other sectors because of the very small proportion of college graduates in engineering, maths, and science.

The best way to see whether there is a sectoral effect on the destinations of graduates with the same degree class would be to make these comparisons for a range of individual subjects. It would also be necessary to pool results over several years to overcome the restrictions from sample size

Degree Class and the Labour Market: Trends Over Time

It was suggested earlier that employers' preferences about degree class might vary with the economic cycle. This reflects a more general prediction from economic theory that, at times of high demand for labour, employers will relax hiring standards in order to increase their workforce. If employers of new graduates use degree as a selection criterion then the analogous effect would be that the employment prospects of graduates, with different degree classes would tend to converge at times of high demand. Experience over the 1980s allows for just a test of this prediction as new graduate employment prospects steadily

improved from an all time low in 1982. Table 6 shows new graduate unemployment rates by degree class for each year from 1981 to 1988. The figures are just for universities and are all subject totals but, given the relative stability in subject distribution, any subject effect should be limited.

The table shows that employment prospects have moved with the economic cycle for all new graduates - firsts as much as thirds. As for the relativities between classes, the picture is unclear. The ratio of the unemployment rate of thirds to that of firsts was about four in 1988 and about five in 1982. But between 1983 and 1987 it tended to be higher than in 1982 at around six. The comparison of thirds with upper seconds shows an unemployment ratio of around 1.6 to 1 in the mid - and late - 1980s. This was higher than in 1982 when the ratio was at around 1.4 to 1 (men, the difference for women in 1982 was much less). If instead of ratios the comparisons are in terms of levels, then the 12-13 percentage point gap between the unemployment rates of thirds and upper seconds hardly changed between 1982 and 1986. Only after 1986 did it narrow to reach nine points in 1988. The table shows that the unemployment rate of first class graduates has consistently been very low. This seems to counter any claim that employers are wary of first class degree holders because they are too academic or lack sufficient personal skills. It is, however, still possible that some employers regard high degree class as compensation for some perceived non-academic deficiency. This remains to be shown and the first destinations results offer no evidence for this view.

A second hypothesis is that, as demand for new graduates increases, there will be a residual group each year who will be by-passed because they are the least able or have the least favourable personal qualities. The implication is that, even at times of high demand for new graduates, there will be some who have great difficulty finding suitable work.

The only readily available measure of how graduates of different abilities have faired is the degree class trends in table 6. These show that graduates with thirds and lower seconds

have shared fully in the general improvement in the new graduate labour market since 1982. They have not been marooned as it were on an island of very poor job prospects. It is of course always difficult to calibrate new graduate unemployment rates and relate them to degrees of difficulty in find suitable work. It could be significant that, for example, the unemployment rate of university men with thirds in 1988, after six years of fast economic growth, was only on a par with that for graduates with upper seconds in 1982 - the worst year ever recorded for new graduate employment!

The evidence in this article on the 'maroon thesis' is unclear. But in any case there is no particular reason to expect such a discontinuity in the graduate labour market. It might be that all new graduates have increasingly had to be willing to take employment that was unrelated to their qualification and which was not graduate level. This might have had a differential impacts on different groups of graduates so that, for example in terms of degree class, those with lower seconds and thirds had to be more flexible than those with upper seconds. But it would be a change that affected all new categories of new graduate to some extent.

(Table 6 is presented on the next page)

Table 6 New graduate unemployment rates by degree class, 1981 - 88 universities

Men	Unemployment					Short-term UK employment				
	1	2.1	2.2	3	All	1	2.1	2.2	3	All
1981	5	14	21	27	17	2	3	4	5	3
1982	6	18	23	32	20	1	3	4	3	3
1983	4	14	20	26	16	2	3	4	5	3
1984	3	11	16	23	14	1	4	4	5	3
1985	3	9	15	22	12	2	3	4	4	3
1986	4	8	13	22	11	2	4	5	5	4
1987	3	8	11	18	9	1	3	5	6	4
1988	4	7	10	16	8	2	4	5	6	4
Women	Unemployment					Short-term UK employment				
	1	2.1	2.2	3	All	1	2.1	2.2	3	All
1981	7	16	21	17	4	6	7	4	8	5
1982	8	18	24	19	3	5	7	4	6	5
1983	7	15	21	16	4	6	8	4	8	6
1984	4	13	17	13	4	6	8	4	7	6
1985	6	11	15	12	3	6	7	4	8	6
1986	4	8	12	9	5	6	7	5	8	6
1987	4	7	10	8	3	5	7	5	7	5
1988	4	7	9	7	3	6	8	5	7	4

Note: the short-term UK employment figures are not referred to in the text but are included here for interest. In any year the short-term rates rises with lower degree class just as does unemployment and this supports the use of short-term work as a measure of difficulty in finding suitable work. Yet over time the short-term work percentages have increased slightly while unemployment has steadily fallen. This is a conundrum although one explanation is that in recent years, some graduates who would previously have been unemployed have taken a short-term job. This would justify continuing to combine short-term work and unemployment as a single measure. Unfortunately the alternative conclusion from the time series is that short-term work is not related to unemployment and should not be combined with it. The evidence on this has been reviewed in a paper by the author and is available on request.

Trends in the Distribution of Degree Classes

It is somewhat ironic in the light of the uncertainty about the economic significance of degree class that the 1980s have seen a steady increase in the proportions of first and upper second class degrees awarded. For example, in 1981 just under a third of university men got an upper second or better; in 1988 the proportion was 45 per cent. It is remarkable also that this finding has gone largely unnoticed. This final part of this article sets out the evidence on these trends and considers the possible explanations.

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Tables 7-9 show the degree class distribution of new first degree graduates (UK plus overseas) for each year between 1981 and 1988. There are separate figures for men and women and for each of the three sectors of higher education.

Universities

Table 7 shows that there has been a continuous rise in the proportion of men and women graduates with firsts or upper seconds throughout the 1980s. Between 1981 and 1988 the proportion of firsts rose from 7 per cent to 9 per cent or by 34 per cent (using the unrounded percentages). The proportion of upper seconds rose even faster, by 39 per cent, from 25 per cent to 35 per cent.

There is one immediate complication with these figures stemming from some universities' award of an undivided second class. Only a few universities ever used this but among the few was Oxford, one the largest. Starting in 1986 Oxford divided its second class and it is necessary to estimate the effect of the division on the upper and lower second proportions. Oxford publishes its degree results and it can be deduced from these that, starting from 1986, the division of the second class added two points to the upper seconds and one point to the lower.

The likely 'true' increase in upper seconds can then be estimated by deducting two points from the percentages for 1986 onwards. The university upper second proportion, for men, thus rose from 27 per cent in 1981 to 35 per cent in 1988. The proportion of firsts and upper seconds rose from 34 per cent to 44 per cent and for women, from 35 per cent to 47 per cent.

These trends over the 1980s have meant a reversal of the numerical importance of upper and lower seconds. In the early 1980s (and indeed for many years before than) the 'typical' newly qualified university graduate had a lower second. (In statistical terms, this

was the modal class). Currently, a new university graduate chosen at random would be predicted to have an upper second, a 'good' degree. It is now just in the polytechnics and colleges that the lower second is still the typical degree class.

Polytechnic and Colleges

The growth in the proportion of graduates with first or upper seconds in the polytechnics and particularly in the colleges has been faster than in the universities. Table 8 shows the comparisons.

Table 7 Proportion of new graduates with a first or upper second 1983-88

	University*		Polytechnic		College+	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
1983	36	38	28	31	22	20
1988	44	47	36	41	34	35
Per cent change	22	24	29	32	55	75

* The 1983 figures include 2 percentage points from an assumed reallocation of the Oxford undivided second.

+ Excluding graduates in Education (teacher training).

Note: The times series in table 9 were derived from the DES FESR and are available from this source only from 1983. It is possible to trace annual degree class distributions back to the early 1970s for all CNAA degrees and also just for the polytechnics. There are however some doubts about the reliability of these figures for early year.

It was the colleges that had the most striking increase in their proportion of firsts and upper seconds. The polytechnic increase was much closer to that of the universities. There is no ready single explanation of these patterns. The polytechnics and particularly the colleges started from a lower base so a similar absolute increase across all three sectors would have had greater weight. Not all colleges were in the first destinations survey in the early 1980s and the coverage only reached 100 per cent at the end of the period. This change in composition of the survey might have boosted the college performance although there is no particular reason to believe that any statistical bias would have had this effect.

Perhaps the two simplest explanations of the college performance are, first that this reflects the growth in their share of total graduate output. As the colleges became better known they could have attracted a higher proportion of the more able. There is no inevitability about this of course and, as well be seen, in terms of A-level grades there was no marked change in the quality of college entrants over the 1980s. Second, many college courses were devised from scratch following the diversification by some colleges away from teacher training from the mid-1970s. 'Perhaps as colleges gained experience with the new courses the quality of teaching and subsequently of student exam performance improved.'

Table 8 Degree class distribution of university graduates 1981-88 Per Cent

	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988
Men								
1	7	7	7	8	8	9	9	9
2.1	25	26	27	29	30	33	33	35
2.2	34	34	34	33	33	33	33	33
2=	5	5	5	4	4	1	1	1
3	11	11	10	10	10	9	9	9
Pass	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	8
Ordinary	9	9	9	8	7	7	7	5
Other*	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
All =								
100%	43,072	43,603	43,976	43,400	42,093	40,541	41,609	41,565
Women								
1	4	4	4	4	5	5	5	6
2.1	29	31	32	34	34	38	40	41
2.2	40	39	39	38	38	38	36	35
2=	4	4	4	3	3			
3	7	6	6	6	6	5	5	5
Pass	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
Ordinary	10	9	9	8	8	7	7	6
Other*	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
All =								
100%	26,570	28,269	30,076	29,573	29,953	29,382	30,505	31,024

Note: *Other covers Fourth Unclassified Aegrotat, General and from 1986. Enhanced (awarded only in engineering). In 1988 some 60 per cent of those with Pass degrees graduated in medicine, dentistry and veterinary studies. In these subjects a Pass is the conventional first degree. Of the other 40 per cent with a Pass degree about half had studied science or engineering and a quarter business or social studies. The rest were spread over a wide range of subjects. Medicine also accounted for a third of graduates with Ordinary (non-honours) degrees. The other two-thirds were again drawn from a wide range of subjects.

Table 9 Degree class distribution Polytechnic graduates 1981-88

Per Cent

	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988
Men						
1	4	4	4	5	5	5
2.1	24	24	27	28	29	31
2.2	40	41	42	41	43	42
3	10	10	9	9	8	8
Ordinary	20	19	17	16	14	12
Commendation	2	2	2	2	1	1
All = 100 per cent	13,303	15,369	16,654	19,994	17,275	17,586

	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988
Women						
1	3	3	3	4	4	4
2.1	28	29	30	34	35	37
2.2	47	47	46	46	48	46
3	8	8	7	7	6	5
Ordinary	13	12	11	9	7	6
Commendation	1	1	1	1	1	1
All = 100 per cent	8,926	11,322	12,815	13,337	13,751	14,728

College graduates* 1981-88

	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988
Men						
1	2	2	3	4	4	5
2.1	20	20	23	25	26	29
2.2	40	39	40	41	43	45
3	14	14	12	11	10	9
Ordinary	23	23	20	17	15	10
Commendation	1	2	2	2	2	1
All = 100 per cent	1,864	2,255	3,173	3,420	3,339	3,644
Women						
1	1	2	2	3	3	4
2.1	19	21	23	27	29	31
2.2	44	44	47	46	45	49
3	11	11	10	8	8	8
Ordinary	24	20	16	14	13	7
Commendation	1	2	1	1	2	1
All = 100 per cent	t	2,863	3,610	4,526	5,028	5,097

* College figures exclude education graduates

Note: Ordinary is the non-honours class. Commendation refers to those graduates who were awarded a non-honours degree but who were judged to have reached honours standard in their finals.

Movement Between Degree Classes

Tables 8 and 9 show that, statistically, some of the increase in the proportion of firsts and upper seconds has been at the expense of a reduced percentage of graduates with ordinary degrees. In the universities, the ordinary percentage fell by 4 percentage points between 1981 and 1988; this was greater than the fall for thirds or lower seconds. The absolute (not percentage) decline in the ordinary degree was much more precipitate in the polytechnics and colleges. The greatest change was for college women, with a quarter receiving an ordinary degree in 1983 but just 7 per cent in 1988. (see Sources and notes opposite for details of the degree classes).

It is not credible that there has been a direct transfer between ordinary degrees and upper seconds and firsts so the implication is that there has been movement into and out of each of the intervening classes. The proportion of thirds fell while, in the polytechnics and colleges (and in contrast to the universities) the proportion of lower seconds rose. This suggests that those who previously would have received an ordinary degree skipped the third class and were allocated to the higher classes. The implication is also that the net changes in the proportions in each degree class could conceal a lot of movement in and out of each class.

Women, Degree Subjects and Overseas Graduates

Tables 8 and 9 also confirm a familiar finding that, in aggregate, women graduates receive a smaller proportion of firsts and thirds than men but gain a higher proportion of second classes. The trends in the degree class distribution for women have generally been similar to those of men in spite of their different subject distributions and that the proportion of women graduates has grown steadily through the 1980s.

The previous degree class article showed that degree subjects differ markedly in their

degree class distribution. It would be quite likely therefore that they would show different patterns over time. Examination of degree class trends for a wide range of subjects (figures not shown here) shows that the increase in the proportion of firsts and upper seconds over the 1980s has been quite general. This also means that the aggregate changes in degree class do not stem from shifts in subject balance although these still might have played a small part. Finally the previous article also showed that overseas graduates had a different degree class distribution from UK graduates. They have fewer upper seconds and more thirds and below. However, re-running tables 8-9 just for UK graduates shows no perceptible effect on the trends.

Explanations

The rise in average degree class has not gone completely unnoticed but it has hardly attracted the level of attention that might have been expected. Neither is it the case that these trends have emerged suddenly. The improvements have been steady and persistent. As there is no current debate about how and why these changes might have occurred, any attempt at explanation must be duly cautious. There seem to be five main reasons.

First, it might be that students are working harder and giving greater weight than previously to their academic performance. However, it is not clear why students should take this view when the graduate labour market has become steadily more favourable. It is still more puzzling in the light of the evidence, documented here, of the very equivocal regard employers have for degree class. Perhaps the sharp deterioration in new graduate employment prospects in the early 1980s had a longer-term effect in making subsequent generations of students feel a degree was not enough and that it had to be a good degree to be valuable in career terms.

A second explanation is that tutors and lecturers are working harder or are giving greater weight to teaching. Thus, it might be that there is both less scope for research and a

sharper scrutiny of academic performance particularly of teaching. Degree class provides a ready measure of the productivity of teaching. Going against this is the reported greater pressure there has been on academics and on resources during the 1980s. Student/staff ratios so over the 1980s in universities and in polytechnics and colleges. Perhaps this prompted students to rely less on lectures and to be enterprising and wide ranging in their use of sources. This in turn might have benefited their understanding of their subject and their exam performances. (Other research evidence, into the link between school class size and pupil performance, is conflicting and ambiguous and does not establish a link for a wide range of class sizes).

Third and obviously, there might have been an improvement in the quality of entrants to degree courses. It is only possible to speculate on how this could have happened. It might reflect rising educational standards in schools. It might be that increased participation in higher education has tended to raise the average ability level of students. In other words, the extra students were drawn disproportionately from the more able non-participant groups. It might be that subtler processes were at work reflecting more general improvements in living standards - both in the 1960s and 1980s graduates were young children and in the 1980s when, as teenagers, they benefited from fast growth in family incomes.

If quality of graduates is measured by their A-level score then the evidence does not point to any dramatic improvement. Table 10 gives some figures.

(Table 10 is presented on the next page)

	Average A-level scores of entrants to degree courses									Per cent change 1981-87
	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1981-87	
University*	9.7	10.2	10.6	10.9	11.0	11.0	10.9	10.9	7	
Polytechnic/College		5.3		5.7	5.8	5.7	5.8	5.9		11
University: Per cent with three or more A-levels and 13-15 points:+	na	27	29	32	33	33	33	32		19

* Accepted home candidates

+ As percentage of all with A-levels

Source: UCCA (universities) DES (polytechnics and colleges)

There was a rise in average A-level score, particularly between 1980 and 1982 and in the proportion of accepted candidates to universities with the top grades. Separate, cross-sectional evidence suggests that degree class and A-level performance are positively correlated. However the strength of this relationship is very uncertain and there is no way of knowing whether the rise in A-level grades would have been sufficient to have caused part or all of the improvement in degree class. Similarly there is no way of distinguishing the impact of a general rise in A-level grades from that of changes at particular points on the distribution such as the increased proportion of high grades.

Fourth, a controversial but unavoidable possibility is that there has been a reduction in the standard required either just for firsts or throughout the degree class distribution. It is very unlikely that academics would consciously decide this but it is conceivable that, acting independently, they could have arrived at this result. For example, there might have been a lowering of standards in response to pressure on resources. There might have been a tendency to make more allowance for students with average or below average exam performances. Even so, it is hard to see why this should have led to a fast and sustained rise in the proportion of firsts and upper seconds. At most it might have been expected to have led to stability in the distribution or perhaps to a bunching of lower seconds.

An alternative version of this hypothesis stems from the clear decline in popularity of the ordinary degree. Perhaps this has meant pushing some students into the honours group and this has led to a general upgrading to preserve differentials with the lower degree classes. Thus, if the third class had been partially devalued by this process, then there might have been a disposition to be more generous to those graduates who were near to upper second standard.

The final possibility is that the boom in firsts and upper seconds seems from the cuts in university student numbers launched in 1981 and taking effect over the next three years. The argument is that marginal entrants were diverted from universities so that this sector's average degree class rose some three years later, in 1984. The polytechnics and colleges gained these students. This would have boosted the average ability of their students and shown in their subsequent degree class distribution.

This explanation does require some dramatic assumptions. The implication is that someone who would do indifferently at a university would get a better degree at a polytechnic or college. This presumably would reflect either better teaching in the non-university sectors or lower standards of degree, class for class. However, the polytechnics and colleges increased their numbers and not just proportions of firsts and upper seconds - while the universities saw a fall in the number of their thirds. So, the implication is that the polytechnics and colleges were turning prospective university thirds into upper seconds and firsts. This argument needs further work to see if it is possible to simulate the flow between sectors and match the observed changes in degree class. But at first sight diversion of students does not seem a likely explanation of the degree class trends

Implications

The changes described here mean that there has been a steady increase in the average degree class of entrants to the labour market. If degree class is an indicator of graduate productivity, then employers should have been able to perceive an improvement in the quality of their recruits. There is no evidence that the author is aware of that employers have noted such a change. It might be unrealistic to expect such a reaction; employers would only become vocal if they saw a decline in quality.

Perhaps employers' own recruitment standards have risen and the rise in degree class has met this new demand. Alternatively, of course, if employers are generally indifferent to degree class then the steady improvement documented here might simply have passed them by.

APPENDIX

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